

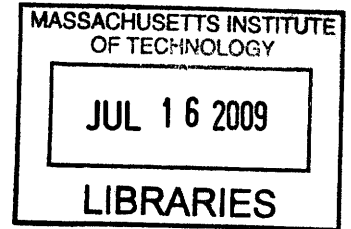
“WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN”

***Sadhus* in Democratic Politics in Late 20th Century India**

by

Rajesh Pradhan

S.M.Arch.S. Architecture & M.C.P. City Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989



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Supervised by Melissa Nobles, Associate Professor of Political Science

ABSTRACT

This empirical study examines the political significance of religious leaders—known commonly as sadhus—in a huge and mature democracy like India. During the late ‘80s and the ‘90s, a flurry of sadhu activism coincided with the dramatic rise of a previously insignificant political party, the *Bhartiya Janata Party* (BJP). As a conservative Hindu nationalist party, the BJP allied with many sadhus, came to power at the center and in many states, breaking the monopoly that the relatively secular Congress party had held for more than four decades.

The sadhus and the BJP came together over the controversy of whether a Hindu temple had been destroyed to build a 16th century mosque (the *Ram Janmabhoomi* dispute). It propelled a few sadhus—who I describe as spiritual agents, whose essential identity is based on individualism, freedom from making long-term commitments, and yet committed to transcendental causes—to band together under contingent conditions and the availability of a platform to voice their discontent. However, both the coalition between pro-BJP sadhus and the BJP, as well as the desire to build the temple, unraveled over the next decade. Not only did the newly emergent BJP broaden its political base by distancing itself from a single issue, but the unity among sadhus also splintered.

This thesis is an empirical and agent-centered approach to examine nationalism and a particular strain of religious fundamentalism. It examines the commonalities and differences among sadhus themselves as factors that explain both the unity among sadhus in one period and the splintering of that unity at another time. Sadhus are individualistic, free-floating, religious individuals who became sadhus not to pursue any social cause, but to live a life free of responsibilities and in tune with their inner callings. Aside from the role of *outside* forces and differences *among* sadhus over key political issues, I argue that *essentially it is the elements common to the identity of sadhus as sadhus that temper their fundamentalist tendencies*. Looking forward, the crouching Hindu serpent, like the famed *kundalini* in *yoga*, best characterizes this strain of sadhu-led Hindu fundamentalism, ever poised to rise and recoil.

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I started this dissertation under the guidance of (Late) Prof. Myron Weiner in 1993. He, like other committee members (Prof. Stanley Tambiah at Harvard, and Uday Mehta and Michael Fischer at M.I.T.) were disappointed when I gave up writing the thesis in 1996, even after conducting the first round of field interviews. Needless to say, my friends and family members were equally perplexed. After fourteen years of unexplained silence, I re-emerged, primarily because of my wife's prodding. Once I had decided to engage with the thesis once again, my old and new committee members (Melissa Nobles, Roger Petersen, and Michael Fischer) gave me the chance to move ahead, instead of me looking backwards to what had immobilized me earlier. If I had to list people who were responsible either for my renunciation of my dissertation or for its revival, the list would be very long, given the fact that this study took 15 years to complete. I thank One and All.

I thank all who helped me meet the sadhus I did, and the sadhus themselves. But, above all, I wish to thank five individuals: my wife, who, in late 2007, made it clear that I must resurrect my thesis or else....; my son, who in his crisp lawyerly way, gave me the most terse comments on my thesis; my other shaggy-haired musician son, who always thought I could do better; my younger brother, who kept pouring undeserved comments on my thesis in order to motivate me; and, finally, Myron himself, a person I felt I had betrayed by giving up the thesis in 1996. I am grateful to my parents, who had given up on me, but kept pushing me despite all my handicaps. And to the lingering shadow of my grandfather, Baba, who taught me the aesthetics of repetition, and the economy of words.

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CHAPTER I

POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

What is the political significance of religious leaders in a huge and mature democracy like India? The majority Hindu community's religious traditions are centered on renunciators, monks, *swamis*, *sanyasis*, and *mahants*—commonly known as *sadhus*. During the late '80s and the '90s, a flurry of sadhu activism coincided with the dramatic rise of a previously insignificant political party, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). As a conservative Hindu nationalist party—a label denied by many in the party—the BJP allied with many sadhus came to power at the center and in many states, breaking the monopoly that the relatively secular Congress party had held for more than four decades.

The sadhus and the BJP came together over the controversy of whether a Hindu Ram temple had been destroyed to build a 16th century mosque (the Ram Janmabhoomi or RJB dispute).¹ It propelled *a few religious actors* from a diverse group of reclusive but popular sadhus to band together and consolidate a fragile victory engendered by a politically influenced court judgment that led to the opening of the locks of the disputed temple/mosque. In the early '90s, support for and intensity to build a grand Ram temple was unanimously strong among sadhus. However, both the coalition between pro-BJP *sadhus* and the BJP, as well as the desire to build the temple, unraveled over the next decade. Not only did the newly emergent BJP broaden its political base by distancing itself from a single issue, but the unity among *sadhus* also splintered. Significantly, they failed to overturn the court's stay order against building a Ram temple—the judgment that had led some sadhus to try to consolidate their fragile victory in the first place.

¹ See Appendix I, pg. 225, on the legendary and mythological significance of Ayodhya, including a map and its sacred places, and a basic background of the importance of the Ramjanmabhoomi temple.

Instead of focusing on the court's changing stances or the vacillations of BJP as the independent variables, this thesis examines the commonalities and differences among *sadhus* themselves as factors that explain both the unity among sadhus in one period and the splintering of that unity in another. Furthermore, although their activism didn't achieve its initial stated goal of building the temple at RJB, one unintended consequence was the deepening of democracy or deepening of populism through the rise of the BJP.² This dynamic suggests that sadhus' political activism is a relatively benign strain of an otherwise potent Hindu fundamentalism in a now thriving democracy.

The working hypothesis that guides this thesis is that the passion and unity among sadhus in building the Ram temple were eventually undermined by three sets of factors: first, the changing *outside* events and institutions that undermined their cohesion, second, the widely divergent views *among* sadhus, and third and at the *root*, the common identity of sadhus as *sadhus*. Sadhus are individualistic, free-floating, religious individuals who became sadhus not to pursue any social cause as such but to live a life free of responsibilities and in tune with their inner callings. Diversity among sadhus, turf battles over who will build the temple under what political alliance, the court's changing stances, and the vacillating role of political parties—all are contributing factors that explain variations in the intensity and strength of *sadhu* unity over time. *But essentially it is the elements common to the identity of sadhus as sadhus that temper their fundamentalist tendencies.* Looking forward, the crouching Hindu serpent, like the famed *kundalini* in *yoga*, best characterizes this strain of sadhu-led Hindu fundamentalism, ever poised to rise and recoil.³

² While deepening of democracy in this case means the rise of a political party that breaks the monopoly of a single party rule, deepening of populism implies something close to “tyranny of majority” of Hindus against minorities such as Muslims and Christians—to the extent, to be sure, that Hindus constitute a monolithic bloc. In another sense, deepening of democracy and populism may also mean the emergent relevance of a numerically minority group—the sadhus—who rarely exercise their right to vote or are otherwise marginal in deliberative and substantive politics.

³ In debates about fundamentalisms—see review of Marty and Appleby's work later in this Chapter—scholars have focused on larger social movements, structural forces, and violence of crowd, but not in the beliefs of a few religious actors and their independent role in engendering a strain of fundamentalism and its splintering (as I do in this thesis).

The Identity of Sadhus and the Theoretical Argument

Theoretically, what is it about the identity of the particular actors called sadhus which explains why they come together and then splinter? The following formulation is an abstraction from the different images of sadhus described in Chapter II and the empirical data in Chapter V.

This thesis focuses on the identity of a specific type of actors, who can best be summarized as “spiritual agents.” The “spiritual” aspect connotes their passionate commitment to a transcendental cause or higher calling—or, as Max Weber put it so famously, a commitment to the “magic of orthodoxy”—yet which is not aligned in any rigid way to a particular political party or organized religious institution, such as the church. The “agent” aspect reinforces this notion of free-wheeling, individualistic actors who are not committed to any particular institution. Freedom, individualism, and commitment to transcendental causes or to the “magic of orthodoxy” accord a high degree of moral authority to such spiritual agents that can shape political outcomes under certain conditions.

Spiritual agents are committed to transcendental causes and have aspirations to act upon them and realize goals that flow from those commitments; yet they don’t want to get tied down to a particular institution in pursuit of these causes. But there are some rare moments in history when contingent events help provide a platform for them to come together around the shared transcendental cause and galvanize them into collective action for the duration of the contingent event. Yet, when fissures appear in this contingent coalition or when there are other exogenous pressures or events, the spiritual agents lose patience, disengage or simply move on to their individual spiritual pursuit, consistent with their free-wheeling individualistic nature. In this sense, spiritual agents with shared transcendental values constitute a powerful latent force in politics that can come together and disband, depending upon the platform provided by contingent events.⁴

⁴ Given that the spiritual agents cannot appropriate the possible transcendental (and society-wide) benefits through their ephemeral and contingent coalition, their action adds to the theoretical literature on collective action. See, for example, Mancur Olson’s, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971. Furthermore, the cross-cutting identity of spiritual agents—their shared transcendental causes getting undermined by their identity as free, individualistic, and non-aligned actors—contributes to the literature on identity politics. See, for example, Rawi Abdelal (et. al), “Identity as a Variable”, in

Sadhus' Shifting Involvement in post-Independence Politics: A Background Summary

Four prominent sadhus who were active in social and political reform during the 19th and early 20th centuries are discussed in Chapter III of this thesis. If we focus on post-1947 independent India, there is a need to explore why sadhus did not band together before the RJB conflict and what their role is in expressions of Hindu nationalism after the RJB campaign. That background may be a useful starting point for understanding the uprising of sadhus during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and its splintering shortly thereafter.

Shortly after India's independence from British rule in 1947, a politically explosive issue—similar to the RJB-Babri mosque conflict—emerged, that pitched Hindu religious sentiments against secular sensibilities. At the center of this debate was an important Hindu temple, called the Somnath temple, in the town of Dwarka in Junagadh district in the state of Gujarat. It is considered as the most important temple of Lord Shiva because it contains the most sacred of the twelve similar symbols associated with Shiva—the phallic symbol known as *Jyotirlinga* or *lingas* of light. The temple's date of construction, as in the case of the RJB temple, is shrouded in mythological and cosmological mystery. According to popular and local history, as well as classical Hindu scriptures, Somnath temple was built by the Moon god out of gold, with silver donated by Ram's arch rival Ravana (a devotee of Shiva), sandalwood by Lord Krishna, and with stone supplied by Bhimdeva (the ruler of Gujarat). Legend has it that the Muslim ruler Mahmud Ghazni raided the temple in 1024 to loot its wealth and/or to humiliate Hindus. According to Muslim accounts Ghazni was inspired by a dream that the pre-Islamic Arabian goddess Manat was actually spiritually associated with the Somnath Temple. Ghazni was not successful in destroying the temple totally because of resistance from local Hindu rulers. Nevertheless, it was destroyed six times and rebuilt partially each time after. The temple suffered a major damage in 1297 when the Muslim Sultanate captured Delhi, and a large-scale destruction was inflicted again by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1706. As in the case of the RJB conflict, a mosque stood at the site of the Somnath temple.

Before Independence, the British did not allow organized protests against the presence of mosques at disputed sites, including Somnath temple in Gujarat, Ramjanmabhoomi temple in

Perspective on Politics, Washington DC: The American Political Science Association, 2006, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 695—711.

Ayodhya, Kashi Vishwanath temple in Benaras, and Krishnajanmabhoomi temple Mathura.⁵ When a few sadhus marched to the Babri mosque in 1934 and damaged its structure, the British imposed a harsh collective fine against the entire town of Ayodhya. After 1947, the call to “liberate” disputed temples—particularly the Somnath and the RJB temples—re-emerged from local sadhus as well as some lay Hindu sympathizers. The Congress was the only political player at the national level, with the staunch secularist Jawaharlal Nehru as its prime minister, who found such calls to reconstruct the Somnath temple as a campaign of Hindu revivalism. But sadhus and Hindu sympathizers did not have to mobilize because there were powerful pro-Hindu leaders and freedom fighters within Congress—such as the president Rajendra Prasad; Home Minister and deputy prime minister, Vallabhbhai Patel; V. P. Menon; minister K. M. Munshi; Bal Gangadhar Tilak; and Bipin Pal—who took up the Somnath reconstruction cause despite Nehru’s dissent. Soon after the Muslim-ruled Junagadh princely state was dissolved and absorbed into the federal Indian nation, Patel spearheaded the temple’s reconstruction for the seventh time. Unlike the case of the RJB, Muslim clerics were disorganized—in addition to the fact that after the liberation of Junagadh, the political clout of Muslims had diminished. The mosque was shifted a few miles away and the temple was inaugurated by the President Rajendra Prasad on December 1, 1947. The absence of an organized Muslim opposition, and the passion and effectiveness of pro-Hindu Congress leaders—as expressed in the following quote—made it unnecessary for sadhus—who were moderately active nevertheless—to unite.⁶

⁵ Besides the Somnath and the Ramjanmabhoomi temples, the disputed structures at Benaras and Mathura also have mosques attached to the original temples, associated with Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna respectively. As in the case of the RJB temple, the dispute involves faith *versus* historical evidence of the destruction of pre-existing temples. Although sadhus did protest against these two temples after Independence, the case of the Ramjanmabhoomi is unique and more potent because the claim is that Lord Ram was born at that very exact spot. The RJB case is also a product of a much more protracted struggle on the part of Ayodhya sadhus than the other two. Ram, as sadhus repeatedly pointed out, is regarded to be *Maryada Purushottam*, or the most noble and most virtuous one, whose name, unlike Krishna and Shiva, is used at every stage in the cycle of life by even secular Indians, in sorrow and in happiness.

⁶ In a letter to Nehru on 24 April 1951, K. M. Munshi, a non-sadhu, wrote: “It is my faith in our past which has given me the strength to work in the present and to look forward to our future. I cannot value India’s freedom if it deprives us of the Bhagavad Gita or uproots our millions from the faith with which they look upon our temples and thereby destroys the texture of our lives. I have been given the privilege of seeing my incessant dream of Somnath reconstruction come true. That makes me feel — makes me almost sure — that this shrine once restored to a place of importance in our life will give to our people a purer conception of religion and a more vivid consciousness of our strength, so vital in these days of freedom and its trials.” Extracted from a speech by Shri L.K. Advani, BJP Leader of the Opposition, at the Siri Fort Auditorium in New Delhi, October 9, 2008.
http://www.bjp.org/Press/oct_2008/oct_0908_p.htm

In the case of the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign, the conflict—unlike the case of the Somnath temple—already had taken a legal turn in 1822, in a claim lodged by Hafizullah, an official of the Faizabad (Ayodya’s district headquarters) law court. As I detail out later in Chapter IV, the first organized attempt by sadhus to liberate the Ram temple took place in 1855, in response to Sunni Muslim leaders’ attempt to militarily “liberate” a mosque in the nearby Hanumangarhi temple complex. Annoyed by the alleged betrayal of Muslims in India’s First War of Independence (the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857), the British—“erected a fence to separate the places of worship of the Hindus and the Muslims”⁷ at the disputed RJB structure in 1859, and allowed Hindu worship to continue. Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, the Waqf (Muslim endowment board) lost interest in maintaining its own alleged rights and properties, but immediately after Independence the conflict took a new turn.

On December 22, 1949, a group of sadhus sneaked inside the disputed structure in the middle of the night and installed an idol of Lord Ram. Although local Ayodhya sadhus celebrated this minor victory—claiming also that Ram had made a divine appearance—any collective action was thwarted by the courts’ decision to maintain the *status quo*. What seems to have happened, in short, is that between from 1949 till 1986 the matter remained in a legal limbo, with Hindu and Muslim representatives filing claims and counter claims over who owns the overall RJB-BM site, the specific piece of land, or the ownership title. While Hindu worship from outside the RJB-BM structure was allowed to continue all throughout, Muslim prayers (*namaaz*) were not permitted to take place after 1949. In short, the unity of sadhus over the RJB issue was undermined by the legal process and by the fact that the individualistic sadhus did not have an organizational platform. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the RSS (or the *Rashtriya Swyamseval Sangh*, the parent organization of BJP and VHP) could have supported sadhus and Hindu nationalist causes, but , following Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination by an ex-RSS supporter in 1948, the RSS was banned. In order to work around the ban the RSS floated a political party, the *Jan Sangh* (BJP’s predecessor), but it was too weak (compared to Congress) to offer a sustained organizational support to any cause of religious nationalism, such as the RJB campaign. The dissolution of the Jan Sangh in 1977 and the formation of an insignificant

⁷ See, Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 220.

political entity in the form of BJP in 1980, further explain why sadhus never got a platform from their “natural” allies.

In the early 1980s, Ramchandra Paramhans—one of the sadhus who had placed the idol in the disputed temple in 1949—started making threats to immolate himself as the legal solution to the RJB conflict had come to a stand still. A few other prominent sadhus fanned the passions so generated, and the religious/cultural wing of the BJP, the VHP (*Vishay Hindu Paris had*) saw in the nascent sadhu unity a prospect for wider Hindu mobilization *via* sadhus. As described in detail in Chapter IV, the VHP started a symbolic pilgrimage procession attended by a huge number of sadhus, in order to test both the effectiveness of sadhus and the prospect of Hindu mobilization around the RJB conflict. Convinced, the VHP soon after established a Dharma Sensed (or a Parliament of Religion, out of which grew the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas Trust) to provide an organizational platform for the free-wheeling individualistic sadhus. The most important contingent event that galvanized sadhus was the unlocking of the locks of the Ram temple in 1986 by the Congress prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, as an attempt to appease Hindu sentiments after giving in to the demands of Muslim clerics (see Chapter IV). Unlike the case of the Somnath temple, the intransigence of an organized Muslim clerical force during the late 1980s helped fuel the unity among sadhus. After the demolition of the mosque by the fervor engendered by the sadhus in 1992, the BJP—having risen from political irrelevance to unprecedented political power—distanced itself from sadhus and the single issue of the Ram temple, although not from its Hindu nationalist orientations.

Not surprisingly, in several expressions of vitriolic Hindu nationalism led by the followers of *Bajrang Dal*, the militant youth wing of the VHP—particularly during the Hindu Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002, or in the anti-Christian rampage in 2008 following the murder of a sadhu—sadhus have kept their distance. In keeping with their essential identity as spiritual agents who value freedom from alignments, independence, and commitment to transcendental causes, sadhus’ shifting political involvements mask their potency when they do rise and strike, helped by contingent events and an organizational platform.

Research Aims and Methodology

The aim of the project is to understand the *commonalities* and *differences* among sadhus in order to understand the rise and subsequent splintering of a particular strain of Hindu fundamentalism that nonetheless contributed to the deepening of democracy. “Deepening” is defined in this case by the rise, through the democratic process, of a powerful political party in a country dominated by a single party. However, given the strong anti-minority sentiment underlying precipitating events, it is unclear whether deepening of democracy was also inextricably linked with deepening of populism in a country where Hindus of all castes constitute close to 80% of the population.⁸ In any case, the RJB cause and the BJP found support among even highly educated and highly placed “modern” Hindus besides the relatively “archaic-looking” sadhus. Extensive interviews with sadhus who appeared to be aligned with different political ideologies and different political parties helped to explain the sadhus’ political role.

The first set of interviews was conducted soon after 1992 when the disputed Babri mosque was demolished. The events that led to its destruction constituted the most divisive event pitting Hindus against Muslims since India’s independence in 1947. Many communal riots followed and thousands of lives were lost. I chose and interviewed 30 prominent sadhus, following them as they traveled all over north India (sadhus are generally on the move). I organized my 1993 and 1996 interviews around two sets of questions. The first set asked why sadhus became sadhus. The second set asked why and how they turned to social and political activism, and the nature of and justification for their activism. A smaller group of 10 sadhus from the original 30 were re-interviewed in 2008, during a relatively calm period compared to 1993. These

⁸ There is a lot of debate over the population of different caste groups and the religious affiliations of their members, particularly because caste status is taken into account in the implementation of affirmative action policies. Generally, in a country of one billion people in India, 80% are considered Hindus; 14% as Muslims; 2% as Sikhs; 0.8% as Buddhists; 2.5% as Christians; 0.4% as Jains; and 0.3% as “Others”, mostly tribals (Scheduled Tribes or ST). What was once called the “Untouchable” castes or the Dalits, is referred to by the government as Scheduled Castes (SC). Accordingly, there are about 200 million Dalits (20%) Dalits in India. 70% of the Dalit or SC populations are considered Hindus; 9.5% are Christians; 3.75 % are Buddhists; and 1.5% are Jains and others. (Source: “Dalit Christian Issues: A Survey of Indian Religions”, <http://www.dalitchristians.com/Html/survey.htm>)

Outside the SC and ST categories, there is another category of backward castes (mostly Hindus), called the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), which is the beneficiary of job reservations and education quotas. According to Wikipedia, “The Mandal Commission covered more than 3000 castes under OBC Category [Other Backward Castes among the Hindus] and stated that OBCs form around 52% of the Indian population. However, the National Sample Survey puts the figure at 32%. There is substantial debate over the exact number of OBCs in India. It is generally estimated to be sizable, but many believe that it is lower than the figures quoted by either the Mandal Commission or the National Sample Survey.” (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_in_India)

interviews were conducted to understand the splintering of and disunity among sadhus, their changing views and alliances.

Through interviews I try to reveal empirical regularities on several axes: becoming a sadhu; reconciling renunciation with active engagement in the social/political arena; the nature of political activism; political ideology; party affiliation; secularism and minority rights; the rise of religion as a political force; and their political activism post-Babri mosque destruction. *And through the perspectives of the sadhus interviewed, I show both the deeply held passions that galvanized sadhus into action for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, as well as the tiered set of factors – outside, among and within sadhus – that subsequently contributed to their splintering.*

On the Selection of Sadhus Interviewed

When I went for my first fieldwork in 1993, it was quite clear who the movers and shakers among sadhus were, that is, those who had spearheaded the RJB campaign that had led to the destruction of the mosque in 1982. So, instead of starting from a random sampling approach, I met the seven main pro-Hindutva sadhus that were at the height of the campaign—Uma Bharati, Sadhavi Rithambara, Mahant A vaidyanath, Swami Chinmayanand, Swami Ramchandra Paramhans, Swami Nritya Gopal Das, Acharya Dharmendra, and Swami Vam Dev Maharaj (all associated in some ways with the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas or Trust that VHP had established to help take possession of the land and the disputed structure).⁹ From these sadhus I learnt and

⁹ The RJB Nyas was established by VHP on February 3, 1986, and did not have a fixed membership except for the involvement of senior sadhus listed above. These sadhus were drawn from a bigger pool of sadhus who had associated themselves informally with VHP's Dharma Sansad (Parliament of Religion), an informal platform established in 1984. RJB Nyas was established to press the Congress government to transfer the property rights of the Ayodhya site for building the "world's biggest temple." In order to counter the sadhus associated with RJB Nyas and the VHP, the Congress prime minister Narsimha Rao sought the assistance of Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati (who headed two of the four central Mutts/Hermitages of the Shaiva sadhus), and set up the Ramalaya Trust. Swaroopanand's stature and the wealth of his two hermitages were plus points, and he had always been close to Congress leaders, including Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv. The other prominent sadhu on the Ramalaya was Swami Ramnareshacharya who was somewhat annoyed with the many Vaishnav sadhus—like Ramchandra Paramhans—because they did not accept his claim to be the head of the Ramanand ascetic community. Since Ramnareshacharya was a Vaishnav sadhu with a large following—and RJB was all about Ram, the tutelary deity of the Vaishnavs—he too was asked to join the Ramalaya Trust. Mahant Gyan Das from Ayodhya, another sadhu on the Ramalaya Trust, was an abbot of two other famous temples in the Ramkot area where the RJB temple is located, the Hanumangarhi and the Nageshwarnath temples. According to journalistic sources, he was friendly with Swaroopanand and perceived the attention given to RJB as a loss of his stature in Ayodhya.

Neither of these two trusts were financial shells for raising money. Many journalists and political observers have claimed that, in setting up the Ramalaya Trust, Rao revealed his interest in not allowing the BJP to take credit for

from media sources I came to learn of prominent sadhus who supported Congress' approach of solving the RJB conflict in an allegedly amicable way, with the participation of Muslim leaders. However, the main dissenter sadhus—organized under the Ramalaya Trust established by Congress—seemed to disagree with VHP aligned sadhus primarily over which sadhus should take the leadership roles in the construction of the Ram temple. The prominent dissenters were Shankaracharya Swaroopanand Saraswati, Mahant Gyan Das, Shankaracharya of Puri/Kanchi, and Swami Ramnareshacharya, all part of the Congress patronized Ramalaya Trust. As I moved in the sadhu community I picked up names of a few moderately pro-Hindutva sadhus who were becoming increasingly politicized. I interviewed them as well (Jagdish Muni, Ramcharitradas, Prem Bhandari, Sakshiji Maharaj, Ramdas, Ramanand Haryacharya, Ramvilas Vedanti, Swami Satyamitranand, etc, see Chapter V). I chose to also interview nationally well-known and non-aligned sadhus who were social activists (Swami Agnivesh and Mahant Veer Bhadra Mishra). I also interviewed a few completely apolitical and mystically oriented sadhus (like Somanand Baba and Phalahari Baba from Ayodhya) as a reality check in terms what sadhus as spiritual agents ought to do as far as the RJB was concerned. To close the circle, I interviewed the stridently anti-Hindutva sadhu Lal Das, who was the head priest of the RJB temple, the epicenter of the conflict.¹⁰

building the Ram temple; and to some extent this suited BJP also because the Hindu nationalist campaign was left simmering.

¹⁰ Acting in their individual capacities, a few sadhus (in a population of four to five million) have been active in modern Indian politics may be useful at this point. The most famous quasi-religious figure in modern India is Mohandas Gandhi, referred to as Mahatma (or great soul). He was technically not a sadhu because he was not initiated in any Hindu or Jain ascetic community. He refused to formally join the Congress party despite his decisive political role in the Independence movement. His close disciple, Vinoba Bhave (b. 1895), also had a similar quasi-religious status. Pro-Congress, freedom fighter, and social reformer, he too resisted joining the Congress party, but played a very important role in distribution of land to the landless. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati (b. 1899) was the first sadhu who started a nation-wide farmers' movement, but he too remained outside party politics.

Swami Karpatriji Maharaj (b. 1905) was the first sadhu who started a Hindu political party called *Ram Rajya Parishad* from the state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). It won 3 Lok Sabha/lower house of parliament in 1952 and 2 in 1962, and several dozens at the state level in U.P. and Rajasthan. The only other sadhu who started a political party is Uma Bharati after breaking off from BJP in 1984 to form the Bhartiya Janshakti Party.

Before BJP was established, Mahant Digvijaynath held a parliamentary seat from the northern town of Gorakhpur in U.P. That seat was later won by his disciple Mahant Avaidyanath on a BJP ticket—a seat won, in turn, now by his disciple Adityanath Yogi.

I interviewed all 5 BJP parliamentarians: Uma Bharati, Avaidyanath, Chinmayanand, Sakshiji Maharaj, and Adityanath Yogi. In addition I interviewed the non-BJP sadhu Swami Agnivesh who was in the legislature in the Haryana state assembly and also served as minister of education in the state.

Political Significance of the Thesis, Restated

The working hypothesis stated earlier asserts that it is the inherent common identity of sadhus as sadhus that contributed to the rise and subsequent splintering of Hindu nationalism, and which ultimately also tempers (Hindu) fundamentalist tendencies. If that is so, is their activism a one-time affair—as it may seem to have been during the late 20th century? Or, as indicated earlier, do sadhus constitute a latent but potent political force ever ready to strike and recoil? The answer—as implied by the working hypothesis—is that the temple-mosque controversy (conceived first in the early 1980s) directly involved sadhus whose *independent* role in the conflict led to the rise of the BJP but also to the splintering of unity among sadhus who had engendered a strain of Hindu fundamentalism. I have indicated earlier, and will argue in Chapter V in detail, that while outside forces—BJP’s lack of interest in the Ram temple, Supreme Court’s orders, and Congress opposition—and differences among sadhus over key political issues and over who should build the temple may have contributed to the splintering of sadhu unity, essentially it was the commonality among sadhus as free and independent spiritual agents with commitment to common transcendental causes that was the decisive factor.

In Chapter VI, I show the larger significance of sadhus’ ephemeral political activism by examining the significance of the Ram story; the essential and multiple identity of sadhus; the significance of sadhus as a political force in the deepening of democracy; the significance of sadhus in the broader field of religion and politics; and the political significance of the thesis as a whole.

As we go through the popular images of sadhus (Chapter II) and the influence of individual religious elites on nationalism and Hindu nationalism (Chapter III), the political role of these charismatic (but non-monolithic) “deviants” will become clearer.¹¹ Their alleged powers to bless and put curses upon others, and to shock and scandalize, are so legendary that if they unite temporarily against a common enemy, they are able to monopolize political discourse in a manner not possible by sadhus as individual religious entrepreneurs. They become the quintessential malleable political force that can unite but splinter as well, and give birth to, as an

¹¹ Although a quasi-sadhu with the title of a “Mahatma” (or great soul), Mahatma Gandhi is the most widely recognized name among religious figures in modern Indian politics. But he was not the only one. I will deal with other figures and other movements in the next two Chapters.

unintended consequence as they did in the late 20th century, a Hindu nationalist awakening or even engender a deepening of democracy as far as electoral politics is concerned.

As I indicated earlier, the rise of the Hindu-nationalist BJP party in the 1990s in some ways actually helped "deepen" the democratic culture of India, and not merely in a populist mode. It helped break the almost four decades of Congress monopoly and gave expression to religious as opposed to purely secular sentiments of the Indian voters. It also gave voice to a small group of sadhus among the four to five million sadhus in a country of about one billion people. This thesis focuses on a small but ideologically, symbolically, and, for a brief moment, politically significant set of religious leaders—the sadhus, who helped mobilize the victory of the BJP to become the majority opposition party at the center in 1991, and as the ruling party in 1996, 1998—1999, and from 1999 to 2004 (besides chief minister-ship of several states). The numbers of the highly visible and rhetorically strident sadhus in this movement was small but served as the public face of the movement. Since the movement had been precipitated by the opening of the locks of the RJB temple—an act on the part of Congress leader Rajiv Gandhi to appease Hindus following an earlier appeasement of Muslim clerics—sadhus helped energize a vibrant political debate over the nature of the secular state in India and what a ruling non-secular party might mean for the future of the secular state.

What is the role that religion and sadhus might be expected to play as democracy deepens and matures? I address this issue in Chapter VI on Conclusions and Implications of the thesis.

Given the identity of sadhus as spiritual agents driven by freedom, individualism, and commitment to transcendental causes, the politically active Hindutva sadhus formed a unique ephemeral coalition, and I argue that sadhus in general will only form ephemeral coalitions in principle. *If reluctance to make long-term political commitments undermines sadhus' political effectiveness, then we must look to symbolic means for their significance. These are to be found in their dramatic presence in the ritual processes of the pilgrimage/political processions (or yatras)—employed successfully by the VHP and BJP—in their role as avengers of historical wrongs dealt to Hindus, and on their focus around sacred places of greater status than any other sacred place in the world.*

Sadhus' discourse on equalitarianism and a caste-less society also has a profound political significance. While BJP played upon the anxieties of the upper castes and business middle classes who feared Indian forms of affirmative action that favor the poorer sections and lower castes, sadhus delicately straddle the tension between their identity as renouncers and being members of a highly inegalitarian caste-based society.

The political significance of sadhus in a broad sense can also be framed by looking through the relevant literature on religion and politics.

Framing the Issue: The Religion *versus* Politics Debate

Because what happened in India during the late 20th century is often labeled “Hindu fundamentalism”—led by Hindu religious renouncers (the sadhus) and a Hindu nationalist political party (the BJP)—debates that took place then and continue even now have become part of a broader discourse about the relation between religion and politics. Why in the world do religion and politics collide sometimes but get along well at other times? For constitutionalists and policy makers the entire theoretical issue of how religion influences politics or vice versa can be swept aside so long as the State adopts and sticks to a right policy of secularism in a multireligious society. But for historically-minded observers, the relation between religion and politics can best be understood by examining the common themes among actual nationalist and fundamentalist movements. In the spirit of framing the religion-politics debate I examine the recent but comprehensive works of a few selected scholars. Although they do throw some light on the Hindu “nationalist” movement during the late 20th century, they do not—as I will argue—engage the identity of religious actors as factors that lead to unity among them during one period and disunity that leads to unraveling of the movement at other times. *This thesis aims to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to this debate by showing that the identity of religious actors may become a powerful independent variable in trying to understand the treacherous relation between religion and politics.*

I will briefly discuss the theoretical and the policy aspects of the relationship between religion and politics—before examining in a greater detail how politics and religious nationalism and fundamentalism implicate each other.

Religion and politics in theory: In theory, politics and religion are regarded as intertwined features in the “business of rule.”¹² Each of the three major perspectives on what politics is generates a corresponding theory of why religion is important.

In the first view, in which politics is a competitive struggle to command and allocate resources, religion and religious beliefs are powerful symbols “used” by political parties to win elections, gain legitimacy, and capture state power. In the Indian case, this is the common refrain one hears about how the political party BJP “used” religion and sadhus to mobilize votes of Hindus as Hindus. Empirically this view does not explain why political actors use religion during one period and not at other times. The religious nationalist BJP, for instance, had existed in the form of Jan Sangh since the 1950s, but had never “used” Hindu religious leaders to win elections. Surely it was not stupid. Theoretically, this instrumentalist view of politics does not account for the identity of religious actors as an independent variable capable of shaping the contours of politics.

The second, “Friend vs. Foe” view conceptualizes politics as a battle between two groups in which one group’s purpose is to prevent the threatening Other—religion being the most significant marker of the Other’s identity—from undermining its own existence. Hindu nationalist parties, for instance, may regard Muslims or pro-Muslim political parties as threats to Hindu unity, however imagined that unity may be. The nature of politics, in this case, will be determined by that underlying friend/foe distinction. For instance, the “choice” on the part of certain low-class/low-caste Hindus to convert to Islam is regarded by the Hindu nationalist party as extreme acts of Muslim coercion that cannot be countered, given the fact that Hinduism lacks an accepted process to reconvert the converted. Similarly, the fact that Muslims are allowed to marry four times—and over-breed—is seen as a constitutionally sanctioned but abhorrent practice that could lead to a decline in the status of the majority Hindu community. The basic problem with this Hindu vs. Muslim or friend/foe distinction (or Us vs. Them) is that it disregards the idea that such primordial animosity may be—as it often is—a product of politics and history and not prior to them or something given. In other words, while this friend/foe

¹² This section is an adaptation of a discussion by *Gianfranco Poggi in The Development of the Modern State: A Sociological Introduction*, Stanford University Press, 1978. The first two views refer, respectively, to the works of David Easton and Carl Schmitt.

distinction as the defining characteristic of politics seems to suggest a never-ending preparedness for war and violence, it ignores long periods of peaceful coexistence between Us and Them.

In the third view,¹³ politics is neither primarily about using religion to achieve state power nor about bashing the minority religious community. Instead, politics is a non-competitive act of self-aggrandizement, through what may appear to be theatre and spectacle.¹⁴ In this view, religion—with the richness of culture and symbols associated with it—becomes the hook to display a political party’s greater cultural status and greatness of character. In the Indian case, the presence of colorful sadhus in all their pomp and BJP’s theatre-like processions modeled after religious pilgrimage seemed to lay stress on displaying the greatness of “Hindu culture” and ideological cohesiveness, and in building solidarity through rituals and symbols rather than calling attention to the narrow competitive nature of electoral politics.¹⁵

The problem with this third view is that although it invokes culture, theatre, and ritualism as new and provocative variables—for example, where gaining legitimacy through symbolism and from religious actors is like adding finishing touches to the stage of a play—it overdoes it, in the sense that religion becomes a tool rather than on an equal level with politics. The causality that is implied goes in one direction rather than also looking at how politics reinforces/strengthens religion, i.e., how sadhus are not only being used but how they use their powers to shape politics.

So is there a way to reconcile these three views in a way that helps us understand why religious actors (sadhus, in this case) might become politically active in a fundamentalist movement? More importantly, is there a need to do so? As I argue throughout this thesis, these three views of politics are “static”, in the sense that they do not show how religious actors themselves might help propel a political movement and splinter it at a later period.

Religion and politics in practice: The relation between religion and politics figures into the broader policy debate over the different notions of secularism and democracy. While this issue

¹³ See, Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali*, Princeton University Press, 1980.

¹⁴ This may have been particularly relevant centuries ago when religion was symbolic of political power. The grander the display of religion, greater was the power of the divinely righteous king.

¹⁵ For a discussion on this aspect, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, New York: The Norton Library, 1965, pp. 151—152.

is taken up separately as part of the interview questions sadhus responded to, only three things need be mentioned at this stage: (a) The “wall of separation between church and state” is a theoretical and a practical impossibility in most countries, but particularly in a country like India with a vibrant religious life. As such, sadhus as well as common Indians reject this mechanical interpretation of secularism outright; (b) The idea that state’s policy of secularism ought to be based on the absolute common essence of all religions—Mahatma Gandhi’s alleged position—seems overly abstract, extraordinarily thin, and substantively vacuous (bordering on anti-religious), satisfying no one, and angering all; and (c) The notion that the state will engage itself with all religious institutions and all religious actors—without favoring one over another—is calling for a state of affairs where political parties are constantly accused of appeasing different religious communities in order to mobilize and aggregate votes. What starts out as policy of equidistance leads to a continuing engagement with different religious communities, so much so that a secular government becomes mired in and dangerously close to religious issues in all their rawness. The vacillating positions of the Congress government in India—sometimes appeasing the Muslim representatives and then appeasing Hindu leaders in turn—is a perfect example of the collision of religion and politics that may have led to the RJB conflict.

Why do religion and politics collide? Perhaps because all three notions of secularism fail to account for an important shortcoming: that democracy registers preferences, but not the intensity of passions. For example, the fact that Hindu sadhus—a numerical minority--may passionately resent preferential treatment towards other minority religious communities, say Muslims, may be perceived as a “tyranny of majority” of Hindus. Given the fact that sadhus do not generally vote, the problem of their numerically small numbers gets compounded. One way out for sadhus with a religious cause passionate to their hearts, is to mobilize Hindus in order to further their own ends—leading to a major collision between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority communities.

But these discussions about the relationship between religion and politics, secularism, and the failings of democracy—the critics might argue—ignore the larger question as to why religion has become a political force in contemporary society. What explains religious nationalism or fundamentalism in all their different incarnations? It is to this question that I now turn, also

because what we considered so far do not seem to shed much light on the motivations of religious actors who lead such movements.

The Manifestations of the Religion-Politics Dynamic: Anti-Modernity, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism:

In the spirit of summarizing what we know about the resurgence of religion as a political force in the contemporary world—rather than feign surprise that it has happened—I will use as reference points three important studies: (A) Peter Berger’s (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World*; (B) Liah Greenfeld’s, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*; and (C) Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby’s. *The Glory and the Power*.¹⁶ In Chapter III, I will relate this discussion to the story of the 19th and early 20th century sadhus who acted as precursors to the strain of Hindu nationalism/fundamentalism unleashed in late 20th century democratic India. Based on first-hand interviews, the empirical study of sadhus in Chapter V will build on thematic continuities and discontinuities outlined in this chapter.

(A). The idea, that religion would cease to have a major political significance, or that secularism would supplant religion, as societies modernized, still attracts debates in academic circles. Scholars differ over why religion and politics become friends at times and foes during other periods. But based on case studies covering Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, Peter Berger takes an entirely different approach. He questions the basic premise that religion is on the rise for it presupposes the idea that we lived in a more secularized world. Instead, he argues, as many sadhus do in Chapter V, that the world today is as religious as it ever was.

Certain religious institutions have lost power and influence in many societies, both old and new religious beliefs and practices have nevertheless continued in the lives of individuals, sometimes taking new institutional forms and sometimes leading to great explosions of religious fervor. Conversely, religiously identified institutions can play social or political roles even when very few people believe or practice the religion that the institutions represent.¹⁷

¹⁶ See (A) Liah Greenfeld’s, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992; (B) Peter Berger’s (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, and Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999; and (C) Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby’s. *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

¹⁷ Berger’s (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, and Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999.

Given that all communities are “religious” in some sense, Berger believes that resurgence of religion as a political force is neither a rejection of nor an adaptation to secularism, but it is an expression of traditional religiosity in a reactionary but innovative form, or a populist reaction against thinly secular elites.

On the international scene, it is conservative or orthodox or traditionalist movements that are on the rise almost everywhere. . . . What they [resurgence in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, and Sikhism] have in common is their unambiguously *religious* inspiration. Consequently, taken together they provide a massive falsification of the idea that that modernization and secularization are cognate phenomena. At the very least they show that *counter*-secularization is at least as important a phenomenon in the contemporary world as secularization. . .¹⁸

Berger also argues that while such “reactionary” religious resurgence may take innovative forms—appear too political or adapt to modernity—their basic religious impulse should not be overlooked.¹⁹ In the case of political Islam, he argues, “it would a serious error to see it only through a political lens. It is an impressive revival of emphatically religious commitments.”²⁰ While political Islam in the Sunni world has generally been associated with intolerant and undemocratic fundamentalism, he cites the emergence of the powerful revivalist—but stridently pro-democracy and pro-pluralism— movement Nudhat’ ul-Ulama in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world.

Stepping outside the religion vs. secular/modernity debate, Berger also believes that the world will always be religious for the following reasons because it holds the promise of happiness and a better life in this world. And therefore he thinks that “those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril.”²¹ By implication, when religion is ignored it raises its head in order to be counted in the political arena.

(B). Liah Greenfeld looks at the relation between religion and politics through the lens of nationalism. The fundamental premise for Greenfeld “is that nationalism [religious or any other

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 6—7.

¹⁹ Coincidentally, perhaps, many mainstream and Left-oriented elites in India regard Hindu nationalism as simply a political movement without any religious content.

²⁰ Peter Berger, p. 7.

²¹ Ibid., p. 18.

variety] lies at the basis of this world.”²² Thus, nationalism is the genesis of the modern nation state; it is neither an aberration nor a reaction to modernity. This view is relevant as the explosive RJB movement in India has very often been characterized as obscurantist and anti-modern. According to Greenfeld:

The location of sovereignty within the people and the recognition of the fundamental equality among its various strata, which constitute the essence of the modern national idea, are at the same time the basic tenets of [individualistic-libertarian-civic minded] democracy. Democracy was born with the sense of nationality. The two are inherently linked, and neither can be fully understood apart from this connection. Nationalism was the form in which democracy appeared in the world, contained in the idea of the nation as a butterfly in a cocoon. Originally, nationalism developed as democracy . . .²³

Thus, democratic politics is derivative of nationalist impulses and not the other way around.

It follows that “collectivist-authoritarian nationalism”—which includes religious nationalism—is a normal state of affairs in the development of a modern nation. According to Greenfeld, although the original idea of the “people” was a bad one—referring to lower classes and “rabble” and “plebs” in opposition with the elite—it came to be associated finally with the positive concept of people as nation, defined in some universalist manner (a citizen) or in a particularistic way (a race, an ethnic group, etc.), as the “bearer of sovereignty, the basis of solidarity, and the supreme object of loyalty.”²⁴ The majoritarian/ethnic variety of nationalism tries to deny the minority or the “Other” a similar status. In the extreme case, the minority group (such as the Muslims in India) comes to constitute the existential foe which is envied, emulated, and hated by the majoritarian elites (Hindu elites, including sadhus)—all at the same time, and in the name of (Hindu) nation-building. The second line of argument that Greenfeld develops to account for the belligerence of traditional or nationalist elites, confronted by a (militarily) superior foe, is based on the idea of a special form of anxiety against a manly and intolerant “Other” (such as Muslims in the Hindu nationalist discourse). The solution to this anxiety was to posit that one day the righteous proletariat as a class would rise, become manly, shed its weaknesses, and conquer the foe. All that members of the weak majority had to do was to transcend their individual identities in favor of a homogenous “national/class” identity. If you substitute the anxiety of the weak

²² Ibid., p. 3.

²³ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

with that of a majority religious group, the equation between religion and politics becomes clear. Religious nationalism is a psychological as well as a predictable reaction of religious elites against a real or an imaginary threat, sharpened particularly by past and continuing atrocities by and superiority of the religious Other. Or, as Greenfeld puts it,

The reification of the nation in the framework of collectivistic [religious] nationalism . . . represents an unusually powerful stimulant of national sentiment and collective action, which makes it easier to mobilize . . . for aggressive warfare [in the case of India, against religious minorities]. . . Nationalist identities [religion-based or otherwise] which owe their origins to long-forgotten circumstances and needs which today can hardly be imagined persists because of the psychological rewards inherent in nationality, its status-enhancing quality. . . Nationality elevated every member of the community which it made sovereign. It guaranteed status. National identity is, fundamentally, a matter of dignity. It gives people reason to be proud. . . . Nationality makes people feel good and collectivistic and ethnic nationality on the whole makes them feel better than individualistic and civic nationality, for the simple reason that individualistic nationalism merely affirms the dignity inherent in the individual, adding nothing to it, while collectivistic nationalism allows one to partake in the dignity of a far greater, stronger, and more perfect being, the brilliance of whose virtues has the powers to blind one to one's own failings.²⁵

The relevance of this discussion to this thesis is that sadhu-led religious Hindu nationalism has very often been characterized in purely negative terms, ignoring the search for dignity, pride, and honor that Greenfeld invokes, and that may get lost by looking at movements like the RJB campaign purely through the lens of Hindu fundamentalism.

(C). Unlike the other two authors (Greenfeld and Berger), Marty and Appleby²⁶ zero in on religious fundamentalism, a real or an imaginary phenomena that haunts many countries today.²⁷ After reviewing in great detail fundamentalist movements within Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (and Hinduism in passing) they set up, to begin with, the distinction between religious traditionalists, orthodox, and conservatives on the one hand and religious fundamentalists on the other:

²⁵ Liah Greenfeld., pp. 487—490.

²⁶ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby's. *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

²⁷ For the reader, it may be useful to remember that when Marty and Appleby talk about fundamentalists they are referring to leaders of religious fundamentalist movements—in the case of India, not only to sadhus who supported the political party BJP but also to the leaders of BJP, VHP, and of their parent organization, the RSS.

When agents of secular modernity threaten *conservatives* like old-time Baptists, the conservatives simply try to keep it at bay. Orthodox Jews see modernism coming and try to ward it off by wrapping themselves in a religious and cultural cocoon; traditionalists like the Amish try to keep the modern world at arm's length by resisting its pluralism, relativism, and seductions. Fundamentalists, however, fight back. That is their mark. . . . Fundamentalists will do what it takes [resorting to violence, selectively inventing history or religion itself] to assure their future in a world of their own defining.²⁸

The tendency to reinterpret history and religion in innovative ways goes hand in hand with the attempt by fundamentalists to shock, dramatize, and scandalize “normal” sensibilities. Insisting that Jesus was really born to a virgin, decontextualizing a long-forgotten Islamic practice of stoning adulterers, justifying the religious basis of Zionism, or insisting that the Hindu God, Ram, was born at the very spot where a mosque stood—are all part and parcel of the fundamentalist strategy of showing that “there is another way of imagining the world, of understanding human destiny, of tapping the enthusiasms, hopes, and talents of modern individuals. . . . Fundamentalists retrieve the experiences, practices, and beliefs of the past [before the enemy descended] which the liberal might find most objectionable—and they emphasize these as being essential to the identity of the religious community or group in question.”²⁹

In a strange twist, fundamentalists, according to Marty and Appleby, choose “doctrines that seem non-fundamental in the eyes of many who do not seem to sympathize with them.”³⁰ For example, Hindus in the past were almost always seen as tolerant, pluralistic, and liberal. Instead, fundamentalists will seek to portray those traits as weakness and urge their followers to be manly, aggressive, and uncompromising as far as the enemy was concerned (modernity, Muslims, British, the secular Congress party, etc.). In doing so, fundamentalists paint a stark Us vs. Them picture, and as far as the Other is concerned, “whoever it is, there must be no sympathy for this force, no vagueness about reasons for response, no motive to negotiate or to let the guard down.”³¹

²⁸ Marty and Appleby, p. 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24--25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Unlike reactionary dogmatists, religious fundamentalists are “shrewd, careful, and alert observers of modernity, and they adopt its useful features [as in the use of media, communications technologies, propaganda during the RJB conflict] while imitating its powerful processes seizing the concept of reason and ‘throwing it back,’ using not unreason but a different modality of rationalism.”³² In short:

Fundamentalism is a distinctive tendency—a habit of mind and a pattern of behavior—found within modern religious communities and embodied in certain representative individuals and movements. Fundamentalism is, in other words, a religious way of being that manifests itself as a strategy by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a people or group. . . . *Fundamentalists do not intend to impose archaic practices and lifestyles or to return to a golden era, a sacred past, a bygone time of origins—although nostalgia for such an era is a hallmark of fundamentalist rhetoric [emphasis mine].* By selecting elements of tradition and modernity [in a post-modernist type of way], fundamentalists seek to remake the world. Renewed religious identity becomes the exclusive and absolute basis for a re-created political and social order that is oriented toward the future rather than the past. . . . Such a world-building endeavor requires charismatic and authoritarian leadership, which fundamentalist movements rely on in nearly every case.”³³

Achieving their ends requires fundamentalists to be mercenaries and innovators. Although factors such as poverty, deprivation, and the visceral need for political expression may motivate followers of fundamentalist movements to associate themselves with a promised utopia of fundamentalism, the leaders of religious fundamentalisms themselves are “highly committed people . . . who are not civil [while] the highly civil people are not committed.”³⁴

Much of what Marty and Appleby say implies that politically active sadhus are not obscurantists, but highly committed and highly passionate religious actors who innovatively reinterpret history and make use of all the resources of the modern world to achieve their non-obscurantist ends. At the same time, what seems to be missing from Marty and Appleby’s analysis is a focus on the intrinsic nature of religious actors—fiercely individualistic freedom lovers, in the case of sadhus—that may help explain not only the rise of a strain of fundamentalism but also its downfall. In this thesis I explore that relatively unexplored idea, to show how the identity of

³² Ibid., p. 30--32.

³³ Ibid., pp. 34—35.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 202.

religious actors may become a powerful independent variable in trying to understand the treacherous relation between religion and politics.

Framing the Issue of “Individualism” of Sadhus

Following from the previous analysis, the independent religious actors that this thesis focuses on are individualistic sadhus. A final framing issue therefore is to clarify the notion of “individualism” of sadhus as used in this thesis.

Western individualism is well defined and discussed.³⁵ In its populist version—articulated by the philosopher-novelist Ayn Rand—the individual is sovereign and the ultimate measure of value and in fact of everything, however that individual may define his or her individuality. If the individual wants to sacrifice himself for some common good (although he shouldn’t be made to), or wants to remain lonely and away from society (not a necessity), or wants to cooperate with other individuals (not to be valued as such), so be it, for that is his choice as an individual, however rational or deluded. There should be no coercion or regulation, however subtle, by tradition, society, or the State, to compel the individual to act against his desire and reason. Individual rights supersede all collectivistic tendencies. Whether the individual wishes to act in an altruistic or a self-interested way is purely his business.

Sadhu individualism is different in several important respects. To begin with, sadhus’ individualism does not lie simply in the fact that they compete fiercely with each other in a religious market (empirically, they do). Nor does it stem only from their refusal to subscribe to any religious orthodoxy or text (empirically, they don’t). In the relevant literature, this question about individualism of Indians and sadhus was raised in a systematic way perhaps by Louis Dumont first, to be contrasted with Western individualism by scholars at a much later date. Contemporary scholars extend Dumont’s analysis and argue that Indian individualism is an oxymoronic term, given the inability of an Indian to completely transcend caste, hierarchy, and

³⁵ Two excellent internet sources are (i) Raymie Stata, *What is Individualism?*, <http://rous.redbarn.org/objectivism/writing/RaymieStata/WhatIsIndividualism.html> and (ii) Ian Harris, *Individualism in its Indian Context*, DISKUS Vol.1 No.2 (1993) pp.31-54, <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/harris.html>.

the influence of religious traditions.³⁶ (Contemporary journalists say something similar—that ostensibly liberated Indian women cannot get rid of the shackles of tradition, however modern they may appear.) Dumont’s theoretical observation was that a sadhu’s essential identity can best be defined in a relational way, what a householder is not. But, as I will show throughout this thesis, the primary motivation behind a person becoming a sadhu is to remain free—under conditions of self control—to do whatever (including this-worldly acts), leading to a state where sadhus can partake any identity, even contradictory ones, as the next Chapter II will show. It is the essence of sadhus’ identity as sadhus that they remain fiercely individualistic and free in this sense, although committed to certain transcendental causes. In short, sadhus’ individualism is far more radically fluid and intense and focused—because it is combined with an ascetic-like self control than its Western counterpart, which can easily be defined. The contradictory popular images of sadhus in the next chapter illustrates this idea.

Ian Harriss echoes a similar theme in his work on individualism in its Indian context:³⁷

[The problem] arises from an acceptance of modern individualism as normative. . . . [T]he contemporary American self no longer manifests the freedom, abstraction and structural integrity expected of it by the ideology of individualism. Perhaps it never did! The contemporary American self is, in fact, marked by an “unacknowledged incoherence” situated as it is “in a moral culture in which radically individualistic modes of thought and action are both systematically practiced and praised and yet also systematically put in question”. This incoherence is very well illustrated by the regular coexistence in the same person of, on the one hand, a quest for rootedness in a traditional sociocentric ethnic past, and on the other by a vigorous preference for self development. If this is so, then . . . [the] unstable American self has some of the fluidity often attributed to persons in Indian. Could it be that the differences between East and West are, in this regard, not as great as so often assumed? . . . Looked at in this way, Dumont’s distinction between the person as empirical agent, the subject of speech and thought, etc., present in all societies and the person as “...independent, autonomous moral being ... found first of all in our own ideology of man and society”, looks a trifle over-optimistic.

³⁶ See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: the Caste System and its Implications*. Revised English Edition. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

³⁷ Ian Harris, *Individualism in its Indian Context*, DISKUS Vol.1 No.2 (1993) pp.31-54, <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/harris.html>.

Beteille generalizes the issue of Indian individualism—as opposed to individualism of individual selves such as sadhus—in a simple, commonsensical way: “The most striking feature of Indian society today is the co-existence of divergent, even contradictory, beliefs and values.”³⁸

What this implies is that sadhus do not constitute a monolithic bloc and that their homogeneity needs to be unpacked. I try to do that and go a step beyond, by showing how the commonalities among fiercely individualistic sadhus splinter the unity created by them around religious nationalism.

This thesis focuses on a specific type of identity/actor, which can best be summarized as “spiritual agents.” The “spiritual” aspect connotes their passionate commitment to a transcendental cause or higher calling—or, as Max Weber put it so famously, a commitment to the “magic of orthodoxy”—yet which is not aligned in any rigid way to a particular political party or organized religious institution, such as the church. The “agent” aspect reinforces this notion of free-wheeling, individualistic actors who are not committed to any particular institution. Freedom, individualism, and commitment to transcendental causes or to the “magic of orthodoxy” accord a high degree of moral authority to such spiritual agents that can shape political outcomes under certain conditions.

Individualism, in the sense in which I and sadhus often use the term, refers to self-declared goal across sadhus to remain free—despite their ascetic regimen of self control practiced in varying degrees. In the case of sadhus a feeling of non-attachment and disenchantment (*vairagya*) often precedes the decision to become a sadhu and lead a life free from diversions, aimed directly at a chosen goal (that often leads to a commitment to Hindu causes).³⁹ *Vairagya* and self control reinforce the quest for freedom. While the premium placed on leading a free life bound by self-control allows many sadhus to acquire fluid and contradictory identities, it also implies a deep-seated impulse to remain independent and refrain from making long-term political commitments. As the sadhu Swami Vasudevanand Saraswati explains:

³⁸ Beteille, A., ‘Individualism and Equality’, in *Current Anthropology* 27/2 (1986), p.123.

³⁹ As indicated earlier, etymologically the word “sadhu” refers to the idea of attaining a goal as efficiently and directly as possible in a manner where external factors do not act as diversions—therefore the idea of leaving the life of a householder—and where internal turbulences do not create doubts, and therefore the idea of gaining self control through various yogic and other mind-body exercises.

Sadhu is that person who is *sadhana sampanna*, who has perfected spiritual practices. *He who has restrained himself, controlled himself in every way, and tries to control others, he is a sadhu. The sense of freedom that comes from that self-control and non-attachment is what being a sadhu is all about. [Emphasis mine.]*

The sadhu Sandhyagiri Shastri echoes the same idea:

The idea of a sadhu rests on *tap* [penance], knowledge, and sacrifice. By penance we try to control our physical and mental senses. That allows us to apply our knowledge in a focused way for the welfare of people. *We are not diverted [we are more free; emphasis mine].*

Finally, the Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati on individualism and freedom:

Vairagya [non-attachment] of a sadhu means the desire for *tyaag* [sacrifice] of the pleasures of the senses [understood in a broad sense]. When *vairagya* is induced by circumstances, that is artificial or superficial *vairagya*. *True vairagya is when a person wants to become a sadhu because he wants to remain free of all attachments [emphasis mine].*

Structure of the Thesis Report

Chapter I is a statement of the research problem and its political significance. As indicated earlier, I also showed sadhus' shifting involvement in collective political action, the research methodology, and an account of how I selected sadhus whom I interviewed. Chapter I reviewed the relevant literature on nationalism to show how those studies are enriched by this agent-centered empirical study that focuses on individual sadhus as spiritual agents that came together in an ephemeral way to give rise to, and splinter, the forces of Hindu nationalism. In Chapter II, I introduce the reader to sadhus and their popular images and to the institution of sadhus, its origins and the function it supposed to serve. This section is based entirely on secondary sources, as are Chapters III and IV. Chapter III examines four major sadhus who synthesized the popular images and played a decisive role in shaping the contours of Hindu nationalism during 19th and early 20th centuries in India. In Chapter IV I trace the rise of Hindu nationalism in late 20th century by focusing on the politically explosive Ramjanmabhoomi movement in Ayodhya and discuss its downfall—based on secondary sources, including media accounts. The focus in this chapter is on post-1947 or post-Independence period, and I examine the role of political parties and contingent events that may have helped shape the rise of Hindu nationalism. This

account is based on analysis of secondary data. In contrast, Chapter V constitutes the empirical part of the thesis, based on interviews with prominent sadhus involved in the Ayodhya movement. I explain the rise and splintering of Hindu nationalism through the eyes of sadhus. For instance, sadhus, in their own words, explain their own understanding of why they united the way they did; their differences over key notions, such as, secularism and the appropriate role of sadhus in politics; and their common identity as individualistic and free agents committed to certain transcendental causes. *In this sense, this thesis rests on empirical work and discourse analysis to understand the role of agents* who united in ephemeral way, to simultaneously give rise to and splinter the forces of Hindu nationalism. I conclude and discuss the political implications of sadhus as a political force in Chapter VI of the thesis. Given favorable contingent events, I argue that free and individualistic sadhus can only make short-term and ephemeral coalitions, but whose political implications can be decisive.

CHAPTER II

SADHUS AND THE INSTITUTION OF SADHUS

INTRODUCTION TO SADHUS AS COMMONPLACE FEATURES IN INDIAN LIFE

Given the focus of this thesis on the role of sadhus, this chapter provides an introduction to sadhus and to the institution of sadhuism. For the uninitiated, however, I first provide a graphic image of the enigmatic sadhus found in most tourism postcards. I then proceed to show the deep-rooted context underlying sadhus' individualism. This historical background about the origins and functions of sadhuism as an institution is necessary to understand where they came from and what roles there were expected to serve. How sadhus are perceived by the average person, or the lay Hindus, forms the subject of a discussion on the popular images of sadhus. As I indicated in Chapter I, and as I do so in Chapter V, the individualism of sadhus—an important analytical concept I employ in this thesis—implies the ability to live fluid and even contradictory identities. The section on popular images of sadhus in this chapter elaborates on those contradictory identities.

The Postcard Image of Sadhus

Sadhus or the legendary “holy men” can be recognized immediately. They stand out from the ordinary in their ascetic garbs, religious paraphernalia; and symbols belonging to different sadhu communities from a by-gone era. Such quaint and ascetic-like figures are encountered as a matter of routine in even relatively modern Indian cities. So although you will find sadhus in locations favored by the classical recluse—their hermitages known variously as *ashrams*, *mutts*, and *sthaans*—you will also find them in crowded streets, around roadside shops, and near temples, exuding old world charm as well as contemporary kitsch. You will see them begging outside people's houses and doling out all kinds of advice as they sit among captivated believers. You will hear them give philosophical and moral discourses and sing simple devotional songs.

They will be there in the hustle and bustle of religious rituals and festivals. They might be at the center of archaic religious practices but also at the center of attention in the popular ritual of *darshan*—involving a direct visual encounter with a living holy symbol. In short, sadhus are commonplace fixtures of daily life .

I present later in more detail how sadhus are, if at all, organized, how they typically interact with people and some dominant images of them. What is relevant at this stage is the fact that their political activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, took people by surprise and shook the country in a very fundamental way. In a country where religious-cultural diversity is commonplace, there were signs that many sadhus and the political party they became aligned with were trying to advance a monolithic image of Hinduism, Hindu culture, and the nation. The graphically picturesque image of the sadhu started to become identified with political fundamentalism.

Most Indians, however, realize that sadhus, unlike religious elites in some other countries, are not about to seize political power or impose a singular political vision. Although there has always been a debate over striking the right balance between religion and politics in India, even during ancient and medieval times, “theocracy”—in the modern sense of religious elites dictating government policies and institutions—seems as alien to the very fiber of India as communism of the orthodox variety writ large. Not surprisingly, all sadhus I ever met as a part of this work or otherwise reaffirm the democratic system in concept, and dismiss the idea of religious hegemony in government affairs. My interviews in Chapter V reveal commonalities and differences among sadhus help to unpack the monolithic image of sadhus. At this introductory stage, however, a background into the institution of sadhuism may help answer the fundamental questions about where sadhus came from, how they organized, what functions were they intended to serve, and the images of sadhus in the popular mind..

The lengthy introduction about sadhus and the institution of sadhuism has an analytical purpose. It shows how historical influences made sadhus different from religious leaders from other religious traditions, and how those differences help us understand the unique nature of their ephemeral but potent influence on politics today. The underlying story about the development of sadhuism is a story about the historical evolution of sadhuism anchored firmly in the concept of

freedom and individualism, the overarching themes that explain the unity and splintering of religious nationalism in 20th century India.

A Background on Sadhus' Origins, Organizations, Functions, and Dominant Images

Origins and Organization: The earliest sacred Hindu texts (called Vedas) that devout Hindus regard to be “timeless” contain references to asceticism and renunciation. Those texts equate the state of consciousness produced by the ritual use of intoxication (such as Soma, the drink that the archetypal ascetic god Shiv drank for a “larger good”) with the natural mental state of a sadhu.⁴⁰ Living a life of poverty, contemplation, and a degree of self-mortification—common practices among the “long-haired ones” such as the Vedic Kesins and Yatis, as well among their more scholarly cousins called Munis and Rishis—are also associated with sadhus

Historians have attributed the emergence of asceticism and renunciation “to the conflicts generated by the growing social and political complexity and the breakdown of the formerly cohesive tribal organization . . . , [which led] to an increased state of alienation and anomie.”⁴¹

[Over time] population increased and town and cities with their large number of specialist groups such as the merchant and artisan guilds gave rise to growing social protest which became incorporated in the teachings of the heterodox sects (namely, Buddhism). The sense of alienation created by rapid social change contributed as well to a growing ineffectiveness of the older Vedic sacrificial rituals, leading to an internalization and interiorization of the sacrifice in the form of *individual* [emphasis mine] ascetic practices. It was within this context of radical social transformation and the dissolution of previously stable relations that . . . asceticism [came to be] motivated both by a desire to escape from the insecurity of a changing society and by the conviction that meditation was an effective means of acquiring knowledge that furthers self realization . . . [It] resulted in total freedom, a break with family ties and social regulations, provided sexual needs could be sublimated. . . This freedom ensured the renouncer a moral status far higher than that of even a sacrificing Brahman [the person occupying the highest position in the classical caste hierarchy. [emphasis mine]. Eventually this pattern

⁴⁰ The link between the use of hallucinogenic substances and spiritual experiences and revelation has been attributed to rituals in other religions as well. See, M. Dobkin de Rios, “*Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the Use of Hallucinogens in Spiritual Practice*”, in Proceedings of the 63rd Annual Scientific Meeting of the College on Problems of Drug Dependence, NIDA Research Monograph 182, University of California, Irvine, CA.

⁴¹ Romila Thapar, in T. N. Madan (ed), *Way of Life: King, Householder, Renouncer*, Vikas Publishing House: Delhi, 1982. Some materialist historical interpretations attribute this breakdown of tribal society to the discovery of iron and its commercial exploitation, leading to anomie in an otherwise tightly-knit society. See, Vibha Tripathi, , *The Age of Iron in South Asia - Legacy and Traditions*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2001.

became institutionalized as the fourth stage [called the *sanyas* ashram] in the ideal Hindu life-cycle model. . . . The *sanyasi* [sadhu], if he so wished, could curb temporal power by using the energy which he had acquired through austerity and meditation. Kings were fearful of the wrath of the *sanyasi*. The *danda* [stick] carried by the *sanyasi* [like the cross which can become like a sword in Christianity] was not merely a physical staff, for it symbolized the power of coercion through an intangible source of strength. Far from being life-negating, the renouncer was the symbol of power and often treated as the counterweight to temporal authority.

Despite attempts by traditional Brahmanical elites to rein in sadhus' *independence*, sadhuism was becoming an accepted way of life. However, by 4th/5th century A.D., individual sadhus started settling in fixed abodes, called *mutts*, *ashrams*, and *sthaans*. The major thrust that contained the wandering sadhus came from a brilliant orthodox religious scholar Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century A.D., who, realizing the challenge of the organization of heterodox sects, like Buddhists and Jains, gave a revived face to Vedic Hinduism and set up four centers of sadhus/sanyasis in four corners of the country. This umbrella organization, with a non-dualistic philosophical orientation, came to be known as the Shaiva *sampradaya* (a Hindu ascetic community based on lineage and tradition) of Dashanami sadhus whose tutelary deity was the god Shiv.

Competition among sadhus and the varying philosophical positions they espoused led to the formation of many sadhu communities in the religious "market"—the most important being the 13th century devotional and non-dualistic Vaishnav *sampradaya* of Madhavacharya, and the 15th century Ramananda, whose tutelary deities were the gods Ram and Krishna, incarnations of Vishnu; and the 11th century qualified dualism of Ramanuja, also a Vaishnavite. The Ramanandi *sampradaya* among the Vaishnavs—at the center of the RJB conflict in the 20th century—whose sadhus are known generally as *vairagis* (the dispassionate ones), has the largest numbers of sadhus, concentrated in north India. The more liberal among the Vaishnavs aligned to Ramanuja's philosophy laid the grounds for householder sadhus (*grihastha parampara*) because he believed that caste and sex did not come in the way of relationship with the divine. Those ideas found a more radical and esoteric expression in the Shaakt/Shakti sadhu community—which distances itself philosophically from the other two schools. Its focus shifted from personal deities to the worship of primordial "female" energy, as in the form of Kali and her diverse forms. Women sadhavis (widows as well as celibates) generally gravitate as individual sadhavis towards this ascetic tradition. Sadhus in this tradition, called *tantriks*, are the most

individualistic of all. They employ the rhetoric of involution of evolution to justify life-affirming and sexual practices as integral parts of achieving salvation.

The Shaiva sadhus, aspiring to total separation from the society and commitment to spiritual pursuits, follow a more rigid tradition—and therefore are less in numbers—than the Vaishnav sadhus, who are more flexible and remain engaged in society through various forms of social work. Perhaps the most organized sadhu community, but numerically small and socially and politically insignificant, are the arms-carrying Naga sadhus who combine martial and spiritual practices (like the typical Kung Fu priests), historically acting as mercenaries or in defense of their own religious community from other Hindu ascetic communities.⁴²

Rivalries between personalities and philosophies gradually led to the simpler and more devotional movement among sadhus [called the Bhakti and the Sant movement], lasting up to the 16th century A.D. Accessible to all, including the individualistic Muslim Sufis with their orientation towards religion of the heart, the movement emphasized the emotional and the lyrical aspects of religion. But because these developments arose through competitive splintering movements rather than top-down organizational development, they were soon eclipsed by the rise of Muslim and then the British rule in India. In both these instances, groups of sadhus took to arms and organized militarily, particularly during the *fakir* [ascetic] uprising in Bengal against the British rule. The development of the devotional movement—and to some extent the militancy against foreign rule—provided a large umbrella “organization” for lower-castes to join the sadhu community. Many unconventional sadhu sampradayas mushroomed, syncretic ones such as those formed by charismatic religious poets and figures such as Kabir and Nanak. In the latter cases, these “liberal” religious communities tried to appease Islam and escape persecution; and, in keeping with European sensibilities, tried to undermine the role of idol worship in popular Hinduism at the same time

Sadhu institutions spread in contemporary times thanks to a vast network of *ashrams* or hermitages that amassed huge assets, surviving on income derived from held lands acquired through land gifts from royal patrons and later from wealthy and devout mercantile groups. With

⁴² William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

such grants came practices such as money-lending and control of shrines, all of which helped make the sadhu way of life an attractive alternative to normal ways of making money.

These institutions continued to function as living laboratories for religious experiments, as they had been from earliest times. For example, the sadhu Swami Vivekanand's founding of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 achieved fame for its program of social work for the poor through free schools and medical clinics—initiated partly in response to the proselytizing Christian missionaries—and made the older, relatively inactive sadhu communities more socially engaged. Vivekanand's aggressive crusade against British rule, together with his fame in international circles as a protagonist of a manly but universal form of Hinduism, reawakened sadhus' self-esteem, self-confidence, and activism in the social arena. This process was aided in the late 18th and 19th century, when the greatness of Hindu culture was stoked by a generation of Indologists and European scholars from the Romantic tradition.

Today, although sadhus belong to one of the many sampradayas or religious communities that exist in India—not counting the charismatic and independent modern gurus peddling instant happiness—they are not organized in any meaningful hierarchy so as to facilitate a collective or institutional response to political problems. There is neither a single “church” nor a few of such stature whose directives sadhus might be inclined to obey.⁴³ Not surprisingly, this fragmentation is reflected in the bewildering diversity among Hindu holy men and women in terms of ascetic paraphernalia/symbols, practices, and metaphysics. This diversity gets more confusing because of crossover practices, given the fact that sadhus of one community find no problem in worshipping deities of other sadhu communities. *Part of the problem of viewing sadhuism as an organization lies in the fact that—despite the historical origins of sadhuism as an institution—many “independent” sampradayas came into being gradually over time when charismatic and enterprising holy figures established their own institutions on the pretext of trivial and self-imposed differences over metaphysics, rituals, and traditions of worship.*

⁴³ An incident I witnessed illustrates the relevance or irrelevance of organization in even the most traditionally “organized” community of the Shaiva sadhus. The religious controversy in this case was over whether women should be allowed to read the ancient Hindu texts called the Vedas. There were widely different opinions among the heads of the Shaiva community. Lacking any central adjudicating authority, it was no surprise that the dispute ended on a colorful but nasty note, when a more liberal sadhu declared that his opponent was simply senile and mad and deserved to be ignored.

Functions: Many functionalist arguments have been made to show why sadhuism took root in India and survived, and what role it still serves. Foremost among these is the refrain that the institution acts as a safety-valve. Because India's rigid caste structure permits little spontaneity, the argument goes, the institution is a useful place for bohemians, world renouncers, and similar out-castes. Empirically speaking, I have yet to meet a sadhu who is not highly self-conscious of the caste to which he or she belongs. But sadhuism can be seen as an adaptive strategy for survival. The idea is that by renouncing and choosing an alternative life-style sadhus come to be supported by a traditionally and religiously sanctioned way of redistributing extra wealth. "As a social adaptation, [sadhuism] provides alternative sources of group affiliation transcending birth-ascribed corporate structures. As an economic adaptation, a significant number of people who would be otherwise unemployed, if not destitute, are legitimately supported as sadhus by society. And as a psychological adaptation, 'marginal' individuals are able to find new and satisfying social identity and escape from irresolvable personal conflicts."⁴⁴ In short, society accommodates "eccentric" people without confining them, as the "West" does, to asylums. And so, the "Indian remains and finds his delusions accepted, part of a common mythology. I am Napoleon condemns us to four walls, barred windows and shock therapy; for an Indian, 'I am Ramakrishna' would be a serious claim, to be examined carefully and accepted or rejected or rejected on its merits and in its own terms."⁴⁵

Most sadhu sampradayas still extend welcome to "deviants." The desire to reflect on a philosophical problem, the desire for single-minded study of classical Hindu texts (or the Sanskrit treatises), are good enough reasons; and one need not declare an intense desire to serve God or an enlightened guru in order to start on a path that could lead to initiation in one of the many sadhu sampradayas. They could be young children who have left home to avoid social responsibilities and family attachments, in favor of self-interest. It comes as no surprise therefore to know that there are about 7 million sadhu-like characters in India today, almost a majority from rural backgrounds with few occupational alternatives to choose from.

⁴⁴ Peter Brent, *Godmen of India*, New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972.

⁴⁵ Sudhir Kakar. *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982.

What many sadhus do as individuals is made possible by the institutional and charitable resources on which they rely. These include land acquired as gifts from royal/notable patrons, held in the form of tax-exempt status but also rented for commercial uses. The diverse institutional function of sadhus brings a continuous but uncertain income stream from the rich as well as the common person. This allows sadhus to fulfill the deviant role of feeding and often sheltering for free the hungry homeless as well as the rich pilgrim, particularly if they happen to be Hindus

One reason for the social acceptance of sadhuism as an institution lies in the fact that it does not demand sadhu-aspirants to do anything in a worldly sense that might alarm parents and caretakers of society. If anything, the entrenched image that sadhus typically take a vow of celibacy, helps calm deep anxieties and well-known fears of sexuality. In classical terms, however, the institution of sadhuism was meant for those in the twilight of their lives, when fears about sexual promiscuity were irrelevant. In practice, children and young adults continue to be drawn to the institution for a variety of reasons. It also became attractive because membership in it did not demand sadhus to be very altruistic, and the option to return home was never closed in principle. Sadhuism became a viable institution for the ephemeral or the permanent deviant. The difference, compared to similar institutions elsewhere, is that its members, because of the holy connotations, came to be revered, however despicable the rumor about a particular sadhu

Another reason for social acceptance of sadhuism is that sadhus provide a variety of useful services.⁴⁶ Sadhus transmit local news and gossip, religious teachings and traditional cultural values through discourses (pravachans) as well as informally through parables and folk stories drawn from popular mythological stories and epics.⁴⁷ Traditionally, however, “the chief object of the wandering sadhus was to meet distinguished religious teachers and philosophers, listen to their

⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that in the [certain classical?] works, such as those by J. C. Heesterman, sadhus have been defined as renouncers who receive, but never give, gifts—a notion that seems problematic when we consider some of the “gifts” they actually give as free services.

⁴⁷ This tradition gives rise to two apparently contradictory images of sadhus: they are seen as tricksters as well as wise teachers. Even as tricksters they command respect, partly because their ability to shock the common man of uncritical or simple modern [unclear] sensibilities. But along with this image of sadhus exists its opposite, that of the wise teacher. The entire scholarly dissertation of Kiran Narayan is aimed at showing the essential wisdom of a rustic sadhu. See Kiran Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992.

discourses and enter into discussions with them on matters of ethics and philosophy, nature lore and mysticism.”⁴⁸

Today, sadhus combine their educational function with their roles as entertainers in religious settings, through devotional singing and religious discourses. On a more “professional” level, the institution of sadhuism is a repertoire of traditional and ancient medical knowledge—based on an understanding of popular alternative/natural medicines and ancient texts, such as the Ayurveda; and ancient yogic techniques that include breathing, physical exercises, and meditation. Sadhus are also healers and, to some extent, exorcists. The scholar Sudhir Kakar believes that, given the lack of psychological/psychiatric institutions in the traditional world, sadhuism evolved to offer much needed “therapeutic” services .⁴⁹

This stress on the therapeutic is reflected in many facets of Indian culture, including its myriad of goddesses (and the sadhus, I would add), and in the profusion of myths and legends that surround them. There is a god for every psychic season, a myth for every hidden wish and a legend [about a healer sadhu] for every concealed anxiety [loss of esteem, depression, pressures of modern life, etc.].

The institution of sadhus has evolved to serve many functions, and to the extent that sadhus dole out relatively free advice on a range of matters—but most often in exchange for some voluntary monetary contribution—the institution serves a valuable function, especially for the poor with relatively little access to specialized modern institutions. As sadhus get involved with the lives of their clients, the services they offer expand, with sadhus acting as mediators in interpersonal and marital conflicts, in the arrangement of marriages, in helping devotees find employment, and so on. Given the fact that the institution of sadhuism welcomes, in theory at least, clients from all walks of life, they have a temporal and a moral authority quite unmatched in India.

Sadhus in the Popular Imagination

The popular images of sadhus are highly varied. To emphasize this heterogeneity, I outline eleven images of sadhus. The existence of this *mosaic* of contradictory images allows sadhus to

⁴⁸ See John Campbell Oman, *The Mystics Ascetics, and Saints of India*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1905.

⁴⁹ See, Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982.

adopt a particular identity over others depending on the context. This dynamic becomes apparent upon examination of actual sadhus encountered in Chapters V.

Of all human types, the image of the sadhu in literature and in the popular mind is perhaps the most varied and colorful. Experts make technical distinctions between sanyasis, saints, sadhus, gurus, holy persons, vairagis, ascetics, yogis, fakirs, mystics and so on. But although in common parlance these are considered fairly synonymous linguistic terms, the image of a sadhu—what he truly should be like and what he was or is—is so varied that no study about their political activism is complete without a description of that diversity. Indeed, popular alarm at the political stridency of sadhus is often based on a particular image of sadhus. Other scholars have addressed this diversity by seeking out the “essence” of sadhuism, through either high levels of abstraction or detailed ethnographic studies.⁵⁰ For the purposes of this thesis it is useful to present the sadhus’ diversity in all its forms because, as I will argue later, it is precisely their ambiguity as sadhus that propels them into diverse political roles.

The complexity of the sadhu image is best represented in the song of the religious bards, known as Bauls:⁵¹

My plaited hair
Is still intact
And dry
Though I stand in the stream and splash
And swim about the river.
I cannot be touched by water.

I tend to all the household work-
Cooking, arranging
And offering food-
But I am not touched by
the kitchen or the home.

I am neither loyal
Nor disloyal
But I cannot abandon my lord of love.

Rasaraj Goswami

⁵⁰ Robert Gross, *Hindu Asceticism; A Study of the Sadhus of North India*, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, 1992. Kirin Narayan. *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers: New Delhi, 1992.

⁵¹ Deben Bhattacharya, *Songs of the Bards of Bengal*, New York: Grove Press, 1969.

Sadhu as a “simple” man

In common parlance, the sadhu is a good and virtuous man who lives an uncluttered life in order to realize the goal of salvation, which in Hindu theology means to achieve a release from the (painful) cycle of life and death. Focusing on such a pursuit traditionally requires living a celibate life free from responsibilities, so many sadhus resemble frugal beggar-like characters and embody the cherished Hindu virtue of equanimity. The “simple” sadhu is marked, therefore, by an uncomplicated love for God and by a detachment from the torments and distractions of the senses. In this most stripped-down image, a sadhu is a good human being, however defined, devoid of any substantive values as such.

Sadhu as a con man

A competing image is that of the sadhu who specializes in duping Westerners looking to the East for ultimate peace. This type gained notoriety after the 1960s’ interest in things exotic, and is alive today on the streets of Benaras (the holy city of India) and in the scandalous stories about sexual practices inside Swami Rajneesh’s/Osho’s ashram. Gita Mehta’s satire of this phenomenon contains many actual accounts of how adept and protean sadhus were in beating highly educated Westerners in the search for enlightenment.⁵² Among her more memorable accounts is a complaint by a female German economist from Hamburg: “But I think they should definitely have a quality control on gurus. A lot of my friends have gone mad in India.”⁵³

Early European scholars compared sadhus with devious Western evil wizards who practiced atrocities in the name of their religious profession—“greedy, gluttonous, and vicious; or those who practice forbidden trades as ascetics and mendicants.”⁵⁴

⁵² Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Maurice Bloomfield, *Cerberus, The Dog of Hades*, Kessinger Publishing, 2003

When accused, many adept sadhus explain such behavior by invoking the concept of Maya in Hindu philosophy, where what happens in the manifest world is not only one perception among many competing ones, but what happens is ultimately part of a grand divine illusion.

In popular Hindi literature and epics the image of sadhus as chameleons with many forms (or *bahroopiyas*) is commonplace. Based on the magical powers acquired through years of penance (tapas), a sadhu not only can become another character-type but can also transform himself into an animal. This image of a protean sadhu is cleverly exploited in the famous religious Hindu epic Ramayana, when the evil-incarnate but a very religious king, Ravan, transforms himself into a sadhu and abducts the unsuspecting wife of the virtuous king Ram. Outside fiction and the epics, J. C. Oman, for instance, reports how ordinary peasants would plough their fields during the day, go to hermitages and claim the hospitality due to sadhus, spend some nights with loose women, and then become transformed again into cultivators of the soil as soon as it suited their convenience to do so.

Sadhus as an anti-householder

The structural position of sadhus mirrors the place of a person in the fourth or the final stage in the ideal Hindu way of life (called the Varnashrama system). Having exhausted all duties of a celibate student, a householder, and of one who gradually withdraws from society, the attitude of the renouncer sadhu in the fourth and the final stage of life is defined thus:

He should not regard death with joy. Nor should he regard life with joy. He protects all but performs sacrifice in his own self for its own sake. He is free from attachments of every kind, has nothing which he can call his own, leads a lonely life but possesses the greatest resource, the equanimity of soul.⁵⁵

In more sociological terms, and echoing the work of Louis Dumont, Gross pits the true sadhu against the householder.⁵⁶

As a group, the sadhus are structurally and symbolically set apart from the Hindu laity and are located 'outside' and 'beyond' the hierarchical order of the caste system [T]he sadhus are unmarried, maintain celibacy, and have severed all social relationships with their family, lineage, local caste group and natal village. They have exceedingly few

⁵⁵ A refrain found in Chapter 12 of the Hindu epic Mahabharat.

⁵⁶ Robert Lewis Gross, *The Sadhus of India: A Study of Hindu Asceticism*, Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1992.

possessions except perhaps for ritual paraphernalia, and individually they own no property. [They] are non-productive in . . . manufacturing, industrial work, or commercial activity. . . [They] live separately in their own monastic institutions or hermitages, and are itinerant . . . Essentially they are impoverished, indigent wanderers who subsist by begging food and alms from householders in villages and towns. Despite difference in affluence, the sadhus' life style and vows of renunciation emphasize a life of poverty.

Empirically, such views do not always hold up. They tend to discount the other positive functions of the institution of sadhus, that it gives, in the name of religion, a respectful place to deviants and the disturbed souls of all kinds. And it also provides a range of concrete services, free or at little cost, to those who do not have access to expensive modern resources.

Sadhus as divinely mad

The sadhu-bards of Bengal (the Bauls) exemplify the divinely mad sadhu, an image widely shared among Indians and reminiscent of the Sufi and the dervish in the Islamic tradition. Etymologically, Baul is derived from the Sanskrit "vatula," meaning wind-affected, i.e. mad; or from "vyakula," meaning confused and anxious; or from Arabic "auliya," a saintly friend. The following poem conveys this idea:⁵⁷

Come if you wish to meet
The novel man.
He has abandoned his worldly possessions
For the beggar's sack
That hangs from his shoulder.
He speaks of the eternal mother
Kali, the goddess of time

Even as he enters the Ganges.
Simple words can overcome
Ignorance and disbelief:
Kali and Krishna are one,
The words may differ-
The meaning is precisely the same.
He who has broken
The barrier of words,
Has conquered limits:
Allah or Jesus, Moses or Kali,
The rich or the poor,
The sage or the fool,
All are one and the same to him.

⁵⁷ Deben Bhattacharya, *Songs of the Bards of Bengal*, New York: Grove Press, 1969.

Lost in his own thoughts,
He seems insane to others,
He opens his arms,
To welcome the world,
Calling all to the ferry boat
Tied to the coast of life.

Anon

According to Georg Feuerstein, the divinely mad sadhus long for the “man of the heart”, which they express in thousands of songs popular among peasants.⁵⁸ “The guru sets the disciple’s heart aflame through songs, until the disciple becomes divinely mad as well.”⁵⁹ But the most popular modern sadhu afflicted by madness is undoubtedly Ram Krishna Paramhans, the guru of Swami Vivekanand, the trail-blazer of modern Hindu nationalism. A description from his life bring in sharp relief this image of a madly divine sadhu:⁶⁰

After the closing of temple at midday and midnight, Ramakrishna shunned all company and disconsolately roamed around in the jungle at the edge of which the temple was located. All he yearned for with all his soul, he was to later tell us, was a vision, the personal darshan of the Mother. The spiritual thirst, the clinician would observe, was embedded in all the signs of a full-fledged depression. There was a gradual restlessness of the body, sleepless nights, loss of appetite in which eating was reduced to the bare minimum, eyes that filled up often and suddenly with tears. The nephew who looked after him became alarmed for his sanity when at nights he saw Ramkrishna sitting under a tree naked, having flung off his clothes and even the sacred thread of a Brahmin, or, when he saw him put the leavings from leaf plates from which beggars had eaten to his mouth and to his head. Even for the pious visitors to the temple, accustomed to a wide range in would manifestation of religious fervor, Ramkrishna’s behavior appeared bizarre. He would decorate his own person with the flowers and sandalwood paste brought for the worship of the goddess. He would feel the stature of the goddess breathing, try to feed her stony mouth, and carry on playful conversations as to who, the goddess or her priest, should eat first. In order that his passion might be utterly real, he put himself through a

⁵⁸ Suggesting that labels such as mad or insane are culturally defined, Feuerstein proposes that sadhus could be liminal characters who travel the no-man’s land between sanity and insanity or normalcy and abnormality. At other moments he believes that sadhus, under the guise of being mad, simply parody our ‘square’ behavior. He recalls the incident about the famous sadhu Neem Karoli Baba who, when asked by an anxious childless widow about who would take care of her in old age, replied that he would be her child and then sat on her lap and started to suck her breasts. It is said that he got his point across—about excessive fretting—and the woman no longer regretted not having children. See Georg Feuerstein, *Holy Madness: Spirituality, Crazy-Wise Teachers, And Enlightenment Gurus*.

⁵⁹ Georg Feuerstein, *ibid.*

⁶⁰

tremendous discipline of repression, until his hatred if he were touched with a coin, when asleep; and he had so conquered the sex instinct that every woman was to him a mother.

Christopher Dawson and Mircea Eliade suggest one political implication of this mad behavior:

His figure is frequently associated with psychic abnormality. He is a highly neurotic type, he attains his professional status after a profound psychic crisis. He loses his interest in ordinary affairs and ceases to share in the work or talk of his fellows. He goes out in to the wilderness where he lies in trance and hears the voices of the spirit. *The highly individualistic character* [emphasis mine] of his vision and his spiritual power involves possibilities of social conflict . . . [as he may use] his relations with the spiritual world for his private advantage against the interests of society.

This image of a sadhu as a highly individualistic, divinely mad one hardly lends itself to sustained political activism of any kind.

Sadhu as a renouncer vs. the transcendent

The problematic of renunciation is complex, and the question of what precisely a sadhu renounces often lies at the heart of criticisms about his social or political engagement in the world. For instance, a sadhu-aspirant claiming to renouncing wealth and social status when he has none to begin with ends up being a vacuous idea. But the renunciation narrative generally runs as follows: the sadhu leaves home; after a period of time, gets initiated by a “guru” to whom he is attracted; does not marry and makes do with a minimum of personally-owned possessions and familial relationships in pursuit of a religious life.

However, although sadhus do not flaunt their ongoing relationships with the families they allegedly renounced, it is well-known that their family engagement continues in varying degrees (B. D. Tripathi, G. S. Ghurye).⁶¹ And the fact that they do not renounce dependence on wealth is also too well-known to need elaboration. What does not get noticed, however, is their lack of dependence on luxury items and their indifference to fads. But lack of dependence, renunciation, and transcendence are not synonymous terms; and the differences between those terms have contributed a good deal to generating the differences in the image of sadhu as renouncer. What

⁶¹ Such interactions may involve sexual slips, exchange of money, and so on. Pressed, even such deviant practices may be explained away by reference to another well-known practice among some sadhus in the Shaakt tradition-- where the practice of indulging in sex at the same time that the mind is fixed on the divine is regarded either as transcendence or as the experiencing of the most intense form of love throughout one's mind, body, and spirit.

concerns us here is the image of a sadhu as a renouncer and the image of a renouncer sadhu who represents the transcendent, pure and simple.

Renunciation first. In the epic Bhagwat Gita, Yudhishtira (the eldest brother of the Pandava family) says if a sadhu could obtain perfection by renunciation then even the mountains and the trees should very soon attain salvation. They are seen always in renunciation, have no troubles, no possessions and are perpetual celibates. In a rhetorical way Yudhishtira lays emphasis on renunciation of the false ego, suggesting that a sadhu should keep his hands in society, while his head is kept cool in solitude.⁶² It is in this spirit of renunciation that the revolutionary sadhu Aurobindo urges other sadhus to work passionately towards making national life better and more divine.⁶³

Western scholars like the Indologist Fritz Staal or Peter Berger interpret sadhu as a renouncer in terms of his internalizing the non-dualistic attitude of an “oceanic feeling,” becoming humble and calm through and through, like the ripple in a gigantic sea. However, it is difficult to reconcile such modern interpretations with those in the Vedic literature where all that the sadhu renounces is the Vedic fire or sacrifices, preeminent symbols of culture.⁶⁴

Transcendence in the sadhu literature implies inability to make distinctions and choices.⁶⁵ In that spirit, sadhus commonly declare that they are content with whatever comes their way. Transcendence is explained with reference to a very heightened sense of living in the present or sublime awareness. If madness comes his way in his love for God, so be it, for that is what he always desired. The religious justification for a sadhu’s transcendent attitude is also based on the idea of desire-less action—non attachment to the fruits of one’s action—so common in the Hindu

⁶² The sadhu Ramakrishna Paramhans, realizing the difficulty of getting rid of the ego or the “I” feeling, explains thus: sadhus typically turn to vairagya, where “renunciation or rather the dispassioning takes place equally well by changing the object of these passion. Lust for intercourse with the soul. Feel angry with those who stand in your way toward God. Be greedy to get him. If there is attachment, then to him; like *my* Rama, *my* Krishna.”

⁶³ Sri Aurobindo, *India’s Rebirth*, Institute De Recherches Evolutives: Paris. p. 102.

⁶⁴ J. Patrick Olivelle, in Austin B. Creel and Vasudha Narayan (eds.), *Village vs. Wilderness: Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World*, in *Comparative Religions*, Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellon Press, vol. 3, 1990. Also see the works of John E. Cort, Stanley Tambiah, and Michael Carrithers on the same theme (see Bibliography)

⁶⁵ In the political science literature, transcendence is close to the idea of political romanticism where the political actor declines to choose between alternatives, dissolving the choice, as it were, in the name of a higher principle. The political implication is conservatism, in favor of the status quo. Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*.

epic Bhagwat Gita. This image of sadhus living in the moment is a powerful one as it undermines any possibility of them having a political agenda for the future. As Georg Feurenstein puts it, “Desires hold no threat, and so they [the sadhus] do not pursue this strategy. Instead, they give themselves tacit permission to and act on the spontaneity of their illumination.”⁶⁶

A sadhu in this tradition of transcendence might be expected to justify his political action and political desires on the basis of some unfathomable inner passion set aflame by contingent events—a dangerous idea, to be sure.

Sadhu as a civilized ascetic

The etymological meaning of “sadhu” refers to the idea of attaining a goal as efficiently and directly as possible, whether you are doing so for realizing exclusionary goals (as Hitler did) or otherwise. In order to act in that manner, there are certain expectations of sadhus in the construction of the image of a civilized ascetic.

Sadhus are said to control and conquer their senses through a variety of ascetic techniques, acquiring extraordinary powers that threaten even the gods. The mythological literature is full of stories of gods, so threatened, sending beautiful women to seduce the sadhus into breaking their asceticism.⁶⁷ The civilized ascetic, in this conception, is unwavering in his discipline, like a steady flame, without resorting to uncivilized practices such as self-mortification. Similar is the practice of keeping silent for a number of years (*maun vrat*). The expected result is that when the sadhu does come out of his self-imposed silence, each and every word he utters is efficient, non-frivolous, and uniquely profound. Silence, together with fasting and celibacy, form not only a psycho-physiological complex that leads to altered consciousness, but also to a heightened economy of existence. Efficiency in words, efficiency in behavior, and efficiency in thought become the hallmarks of the image of a sadhu as a highly civilized ascetic. Sadhus, in this

⁶⁶ Georg Feurenstein, *Holy Madness*

⁶⁷ The literature on sadhu practices links asceticism with the goal not simply of preventing the loss of semen, but also of achieving orgasm that is, in contrast to conventional orgasm, directed inwards and upwards. Unrestricted, sadhus accumulate enough energy (*tapas*) through such practices to interfere with nature, the playfield of gods. In return [[reward?]], gods are forced to grant boons to sadhus that allow them to undermine the gods' powers at later stages.

popular image, may appear extremely effective as efficient political propagandists because of “getting to the point”, of “hitting the target” efficiently.

Sadhu as a barbaric ascetic

To begin with, the image of sadhu as a barbaric ascetic is closely linked with the rise of the institution of sadhuism itself.⁶⁸

The description of sadhus as barbaric ascetics—made popular by early Europeans and touristy picture postcards today—finds echo in the following :⁶⁹

Besides necklaces and rosaries, they are surprised at [sadhus’] use of phallic emblems worn, bells around arms, big ear-rings, metal armlets, all kinds of stones in necklaces, conches worn, all styles of hair, quaint figures and symbols painted at different parts of body, chains, chastity bells, things pierced through skin, etc. What very queer, eccentric and barbarous attempts at beautification!

They clothed themselves in the bark of trees, wore matted hair, besmeared themselves from with dirt from head to foot, and in solitude, upon the lone mountains, endured the greatest privations of hunger and thirst. They stood for years on their toes, with their arms uplifted and their eyelids wide open. Not content with these sore penances, they, in their zeal, cut off pieces of their own flesh and threw them into the fire. The mountains became heated by the fervor of these austerities, and the gods beholding their doings, and alarmed

⁶⁸ The following is adapted from AIA: At the time of the rise of Buddhism, the belief in the efficacy of self-mortification, self-torture and holiness of austerity (tapas) appeared to have reached its zenith, and asceticism was coming to be regarded as identical with religiousness, and piety with self-torture. While Brahmins appeared to be wanting to rein in these sadhus within the classical Hindu hierarchy, some from the Buddhist orientation seemed to take pride in outdoing their Brahmanic rivals as regards rigorous conduct, mistaking nastiness and filthiness for the highest pitch of ascetic virtue. Thus during this period we have accounts of sadhus who lived like ‘dog-ascetics’ and ‘ox-ascetics’: of those who lived like birds, picking up grains left in the fields; or of those who ate grass like animals or lived with snakes and in water, with tortoises eating parts of their bodies. All this was based on the idea that misery itself was a virtue and the highest happiness in Heaven could be achieved by undergoing sufferings of all kind. The Jain sadhus were hardly to be left behind. It is said that people persecuted Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, for such practices, set dogs on him, beat him, threw objects at him: but Mahavira withstood it all, like a lotus leaf he remained unsoiled.

⁶⁹ J. C. Oman. The objective behind barbaric ascetic practices was not simply to achieve practical results, but also reflected a subtle attitude towards life. According to Oman, “the belief is that “the soul [is] like a woman whose lover is the body, but the husband is the Great Soul/God. [The idea then is] to detach the woman from her lover and reunite her with her lawful husband.” In this sense, the sadhu’s mortifications and harsh practices on the body are meant to prevent the soul/woman to derive any pleasure from the body/lover, and by inducing detachment in this way the soul is slowly and gradually led towards the real lover/husband. Incidentally, we find here yet another theory of renunciation and detachment discussed earlier. [[the meaning of this last sentence is unclear]]

As far as justifications go for such practices, there are many. For instance, many repellent acts are seen to be implied by stretching the Vedantic philosophy: If everything in existence is only a manifestation of the Universal Soul, nothing can be unclean.

for the consequences that might ensure, did everything in their power to divert them from the strict observance of their vows.

Much later, Greek historians found a term for the barbaric ascetics and called them gymnosophists.

The closest thing to such “shocking” practices that I ever witnessed was sadhus sitting in the middle of their sacred fires (*dhuni*) at a safe distance from the sacred flames. Yet the image of a sadhu as a barbaric ascetic is so well entrenched that it carries over in people’s judgment of sadhus in general. This image has enormous political implications, as in the popular Indian tradition, self-mortifying asceticism leads to greater accumulation of spiritual energy and the powers to bless and place curse on opponents. Thus, barbaric asceticism cannot be trivialized for it allows sadhus to exercise enormous influence over politicians trying to harness the “luck” factor in competitive electoral politics.

Sadhu as a miracle worker

Indian parents often tell their children not to go too close to unfamiliar sadhus, out of fear that they might cast a magical spell on them or impress the children with miracle and take them away (to make sadhus out of them). Several sadhus I discuss later in Chapter V claim to have been enchanted by a miraculous events performed by sadhus. . The origins of several sadhu sampradayas/communities are also shrouded in magic and mystery.

If not performing magic or miracles — assuming any human form, placing curses, reading others’ thoughts—sadhus today are expected by average Indians to act like wise men with a magical access to the unknown, as an astrologer with direct knowledge of planets and their influences. One such Indian, after declaring that most sadhus were frauds, nevertheless lectured Paul Brunton before he set out on his well documented search for the true sadhu:⁷⁰

Go, however, to some place like Rishikesh, over which the mighty Himalayas keep eternal guard. There you will find a totally different class of men They are mostly good men studying our sacred books and chanting prayer . . . in solitary retreats far from the big cities, in the seclusion of lonely jungles or mountain caves, men who devote their entire existence to practice which they believe will bring marvelous powers. Some of

⁷⁰ See, Paul Brunton, *My Search in Secret India*, 1934, Rider, 1970.

these men will eschew all mention of religion and scorn it; others, however, are highly religious; but all of them unite in the struggle to wrest from Nature a mastery over forces invisible and tangible.”

At the end of years of his search, in what has become one of the most widely read book of its kind in India in English, Brunton describes the magical feats of such sadhus. The stories are consistent with the belief among many Indians that sadhus possess control over life and death.⁷¹

Sadhus also perform smaller miracles, as for example in an episode that occurred during my interviews. Our agenda called for a theoretical discussion about religion and politics when the sadhu, with a twinkle in his eye, suddenly asked me if I wanted to see “one of those things.” Just then one of his helpers walked in with a tray full of small earthen cups of tea. I picked one up randomly and was about to take the first sip when the sadhu told me to put it down. Closing his eyes, he blew gently into his closed hand; and turning to me—I, sitting a good eight feet from him—asked me to have my tea. This time when I brought the tea to my lips, I smelt instead the fragrance of hundreds of flowers. I wondered if he could do something similar to the bitter political environment in the country at that time. Given this image of a sadhu as a miracle worker in the popular mind, it may account for his ability to hypnotize masses to follow his own agenda.

Sadhu as a religious scholar

One of the minimal requirements for an aspiring sadhu is to master the seminal religious texts of his or her sampradaya. Many sadhus today do not know Sanskrit, so they end up turning not to

⁷¹ “Once again I am in the [sadhu’s] house. He tells me that he can restore life only to a small animal. A sparrow is strangled and left exposed to our gaze for about an hour Its eyes are motionless, its body sad and stiff. The magician picks up his magnifying glass and concentrates a ray of sunlight into an eye of the bird. I wait while a few minutes pass uneventfully. The old man sits bent over his strange task, his large eyes fixed in a glassy stare, his face cold, emotionless and non-committal. Suddenly, his lips open and his voice breaks out into a weird, crooning chant in some language which is unknown to me. A little later the bird’s body begins to twitch. Then comes a slight fluttering of the feathers and within a few minutes the sparrow is on its legs, hopping around the floor. During its next phase of this strange existence, the bird gathers sufficient strength to fly up into the air, where it busies itself for a while in finding new perching points as it flies around the room. A tense half-hour passes, while I watch the fluttering efforts of the revived creature. At last a sudden climax provides me with a fresh surprise. The poor sparrow falls through the air and lies motionless at our feet. It remains there without stirring. An examination reveals it as breathless and quite dead.” Paul Brunton, *ibid*.

The ability to will death is considered generally to be the most profound of “magical skill” (*sidhhi*) a sadhu can have. Perhaps the most famous sadhu in recent times, Deoraha Baba—routinely visited by top politicians—is said to have done precisely that some years ago by [willing?] his own head to split in the middle.

the critical study of Vedas, but to vernacular or populist writings found in texts like Ramcharitmanas. Paramount is the sadhu's ability to connect stories and parables found in mythologies and terse religious texts with contemporary problems faced by individuals and society. Religious scholars like Swami Chinmayanand—one of the founders of the stridently Hindu nationalist VHP—was famed not so much for his scholarship as he was for his rhetorical skill in connecting religion in a humorous way with people's everyday lives. As he often said before his long lectures, "I am not going to lecture you about what to do and what not to do, because in the end we will all be in the box."

Cultivating the scholar image allows sadhus to serve as specialists in religious practice. For example, sadhus increase their incomes by presiding over sacrificial rituals (*yajna*) and other religious ceremonies. Failing to perform rituals correctly is a surefire way to provoke sadhus to anger—and their anger is legendary. Such a dispute did take place during the foundation-laying worship ceremony of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, threatening to split their unity early on.

Their mastery of ancient religious texts also allows sadhus to act as healers, therapists and the like. Drawing from texts on yoga and the Ayurveda, sadhus freely propound on the positive properties of particular herbs and breathing techniques. As popular shamans, psychotherapists, and counselors—catering to the needs of mostly lower class/caste Hindus—their role as specialists of "alternative" health is quite unmatched—to the extent that even many "modern" Hindus, having exhausted Western treatments, often turn to sadhus for expert advice. The best known examples today are Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Swami Ramdev, with a huge international following that continues to baffle doctors trained in the Western tradition.

Although specialize as scholars, they are flexible enough in the application of what they know to suit a particular audience. And although the political implications of the scholar-healer image are rich and varied, it tends to point towards conservatism, since many such specialists urge their religious patrons and "patients" to look inwards for happiness or solution, no matter how awful things are in the social and political world outside.

Sadhu as a warrior ascetic

In Kumbha Mela, the largest religious fair in the world, the famed warrior ascetics known as the Naga sadhus appear bedecked with swords, tridents, arms, and flags.⁷² They are naked or almost so, smeared by sacred ashes, but armed with a reputation for the unflinching use of worldly weapons in offence or defense. Weapons, asceticism and excruciatingly difficult physical exercises help desensitize the sadhus to pain, analogous to army training that keeps soldiers ready for battle. The Naga sadhus traditionally take the first dip in the river at the Kumbha, perhaps as an acknowledgement of their role in protecting different sadhu sampradayas from each other in pre-medieval and medieval times. In history, they not only fought to protect one sadhu sampradaya from another, but also acted as guards against banditry, and as mercenaries for Hindu as well as Muslim kings.⁷³

During the late 19th century, the religious reform movement known as Arya Samaj resurrected the image of the militant sadhu. Its founder, sadhu Dayanand Saraswati, emphasized Spartan masculinity as a way to overcome the virile British and the fierce Muslim rulers. Not much came out of the movement, primarily because of its attempt to reform Hinduism from above. In the 20th century, the image of sadhu as a warrior ascetic is best popularized by Bankim Chandra where armed sadhus render the song *Bande Mataram* that came to motivate revolutionary anti-British patriots like no other song before (and today, the national song of India).⁷⁴

⁷² The Kumbha Mela is held every four years of a 12-year cycle, culminating in a great Kumbha at Allahabad in north India at the confluence of three rivers, the Ganges, the Yamuna, and the not-so-visible Saraswati. It attracts close to 60 million people, and is the largest gathering of sadhus at any one place. The Naga sadhus combine their martial arts and spiritual practices in places called akharas, which are akin to military regiments or gymnasiums and in which they practice wrestling and fighting. There are six principal akharas on the Shaiva side and six on the Vaishnava side, having several branches. Aside from these there are smaller independent akharas.

⁷³ For the history of militant ascetics, see G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*, Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 1964; Robert L. Gross, *The Sadhus of India: A Study of Hindu Asceticism*, Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1992; and Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sanyasi Uprisings*, Delhi: K. P. Bagchi & Co., 1992; and William Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, Cambridge University Press, 2006. That literature also shows how sadhus have fought not only to protect their religious communities from competing Hindu organizations, but they also acted as mercenaries and served for Muslim kings against Hindu rulers.

⁷⁴ See, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, *Anandmath*, New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1992. The militant sadhus organized themselves secretly into the radical Order of Children, recruiting and training new sadhu initiates, and indulging in all kinds of anti-British activities, including occupying or destroying government properties. As reported by Bankim Chandra, a typical initiation would go like this: “Do you swear before God and Mother India that you will obey all the laws of the order of the children?” “Yes, indeed.” “Do you promise not to live the life of a householder until we win our victory?” “We do.” “Will you forsake your father and mother?” “We will.” “Wife and

The thoughts and exploits of the sadhu Aurobindo against British rule—discussed in Chapter III—reinforced the image of a sadhu as a militant ascetic. Unlike other sadhus, Aurobindo received classical as well as modern European education in Europe, renouncing a cushy career as an academic for the rough life of a sadhu in a revolutionary and a secretive cell in Bengal.

In recent history, the image of a sadhu as a warrior ascetic sharpened when, in the 1960s, the sadhu-cum-member of parliament Swami Rameshwaranand helped incite an anti-Muslim riot over the issue of cow slaughter. He organized thousands of sadhus in a march on the Parliament, surrounding it and setting fire to several government buildings and vehicles. Sadhu militancy resurfaced again during the late '80s and early '90s during the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute and the destruction of the mosque.

The political implications of this image of a sadhu as a militant and a warrior ascetic is indeed the subject of this thesis. At this stage it seems safe to say that the crosscutting images of sadhus presented in this chapter may counter the stridency implied here. I tackle that issue in empirical terms in Chapter V.

Sadhu as a pacifist Yogi

The underlying theme that cuts most interpretations of what a yogi is that a yogi stills the mind through a variety of techniques in order to achieve nothing or Nothingness writ large. Put another way, a yogi creates a vacuum in the mind to be filled by a larger vacuum, a merging of the soul with the Super Soul. The unintended consequence of that process is to be filled with intense happiness (extreme self-interested pleasure) and a great pacifist love for the whole of creation (extreme altruism).⁷⁵ Neither in theory, nor in the popular image of a sadhu as a yogi, is

children?" "Yes." "Friends and relatives, servants and maids?" "Yes." "Wealth, property and enjoyment?" "Yes, we renounce everything we have." "Will you take up arms to fight for the freedom of Mother India?" "Yes, most decidedly we will." "And never run away from the battle field?" "No, never." "If you ever break your promises?" "We shall enter burning flames or take poison or die fighting for the Mother [India]. "Now I am willing to initiate you. You must never break your promises. God and Mother India are your witnesses. Hell is the only fitting punishment for those who break their word of honor." "Then sing Bande Mataram."

⁷⁵ Paul Brunton reports this in his encounter with the yogi Sudhei Babu. "We seek the condition of sacred trance. Then it is that he frees his mind from his surroundings; objects fade away and the outside world seems to disappear. He discovers the soul as the living, real being within himself. All he needs is a single experience of this kind. When

there any mention of a God whose kingdom the sadhu may like to establish on earth. Theocratic fundamentalism is out.

To put in another way, the notion of sadhu as a yogi is similar to that of the renouncer. Theoretically, however, a yogi goes one step beyond renunciation and even transcendence in that he becomes a witness to his own consciousness. The stereotype image of the long-haired ascetic sitting in remote caves fits is a good graphic example. While this image of a sadhu as a yogi precludes any kind of political activism short of pacifism and universalism, it can also be argued that the tabula rasa mind of a yogi, however empty or blank, does not imply the non-partisanship at all times. In short, the sadhu as a pacifist may also be an ambivalent political actor.

The Commonality: Not a Mixed Lot but Inherently Self-Contradictory

Given these eleven somewhat contradictory aspects of sadhuism, there is one cross-cutting theme: ambiguity. More poetically, the eighteenth-century sadhu Paltu Sahib from Ayodhya says this:⁷⁶

At times his words are humble; At times he sits up proud.
At times he sings our Hari's play; At times he says the name of Ram within.
At times he says the world is true; At times he holds it false.
At times he talks about the Lord with Form; At times he shows the Formless.
At times he talks about the dualistic path; At times he becomes non-dual

The renouncer, then, is “the archetypal dissenter and a constant source of perplexity” (J. C. Heesterman), or as Georg Feuerstein puts it:

They are masters of inversion, proficient breakers of taboos, and lovers of surprise, contradiction, and ambiguity. They share these skills and penchants with the traditional figures of the trickster and the clown. Their guiding ideals were freedom from object dependence (often manifesting in voluntary poverty and a life of wandering) . . . At times their disregard for secular attitudes and institutions manifested as active disrespect and social criticism.⁷⁷

The secondary literature points unambiguously to the inherent ambiguity or contradictoriness as the defining characteristic of the individual sadhu. Yet, prominent sadhus have been quite unambiguous in pursuing the agenda of Hindu revivalism and Hindu nationalism, as the next

one enters into the sacred trance, a kind of vacuum is created within the mind. The body will appear to an observer to be not only in trance, but apparently dead, for all breathing stops when the deepest point is attained”.

⁷⁶ Citation, in Georg???

⁷⁷ Citation

chapter will indicate. Was there a deeper agenda that unfolded over time? After reviewing the general relation between religion and politics, I explore this question by looking at four religious actors in late 19th to early 20th century India (Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekanand, and Guru Golwalkar).

What is also striking about the different images of sadhus presented in this chapter is that not even a single image implies—in theory at least—that sadhus ought to do social work or something “good for society.” During my interviews I remember vividly the sadhu Mauni Baba’s irritation with the idea that sadhu is a good man doing good things. It is interesting that even in the Kumbha Mela, the sadhus of the Ram Krishna Mission—known for their extensive social work, adopted to rival Christian missionaries—have often been asked by other traditional sadhus to be the last ones to take the ceremonial dip in the river, implying how least sadhu-like actors the Rama Krishna sadhus actually were. This common theme connects with the idea that sadhus, of whatever stripe, essentially show devotees the roads to salvation or liberation, understood in the Hindu sense as a release from the painful cycle of death and rebirth. Although several nationalist sadhus have actually justified their political activism in the name of religion and spirituality (Chapter V) and although there are propensities that certain kinds of sadhus may gravitate towards a specific kind of political activism, there is no intrinsic or theoretical connection between the identity of sadhus as sadhus and Hindu revivalism and Hindu nationalism.

It seems clear from the discussion on popular images that the ability to assume or adopt a whole range of images can perhaps best be explained by the idea of individualism invoked in Chapter I. Having achieved independence from the responsibilities of a household life, sadhus’ lives are centered on the idea of freedom. There are no compulsions to do social work or to follow political diktats. This implies a disconnect from larger causes such as politics. The contradictory images of sadhus that I displayed in this chapter allows sadhus to become political actors while remaining true to themselves.

CHAPTER III

Sadhus and the Emergence of Religious Nationalism in late 19th Century and Early 20th Century India

The previous chapter provided an introduction to the institution of sadhuism, and offered glimpses of the multidimensional images of sadhus. Against this backdrop, how did sadhus come to acquire center stage in the rise of Hindu nationalism during the RJB conflict? To understand this, we need to trace the historical antecedents of the phenomenon and look at the historical precursors of sadhu activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Consistent with the focus of this thesis on the autonomous role of sadhus as religious leaders, I focus in this chapter on four “historical giants” among sadhus and show how their ideas progressed over time, their voices rising to a deafening shout by the time of the Ayodhya incident that is discussed in the subsequent Chapter IV.. The Ayodhya incident is critical not only because it sets the context for the empirical part of this thesis (Chapter V), but also because it is the first time in post-Independence India that so many sadhus rose as a political force. An unintended consequence of their unity was that it helped bring to power a nationalist party that broke more than four decades of Congress’s hegemony. A decade later, the sadhus’ unity had splintered.

The ideas of the four sadhus discussed below reflect not only their personal religious experiences and the historical context (of British rule and a pre-British Muslim dominance); they also demonstrate the immense intellectual and religious reinterpretation of established theories. In order to appreciate their nationalisms it is important to understand the building blocks of their worldviews, one individual at a time, one thought at a time that provided the foundation for later sadhu activism and therefore contributed to the destruction of a built structure—the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. *As this chapter will also show, all four sadhus constructed elite theories of Hindu nationalism that found support neither among the common people nor among average sadhus. But sadhus had to wait till the late 1980s and early 1990s*

when religion and politics were constructed more along populist lines. Nevertheless, the following elitist and nationalistic ideas of the sadhus remain in political and popular imagination, and created the platform for future sadhu activism. Because these ideas are so important, we must understand them first before we look into the Ayodhya conflict (Chapter IV), and the commonalities and differences among sadhus today who engender nationalism during some period and squander it at other times (Chapter V).

As the analysis below will show, over a period of time sadhus shifted their focus from projecting Hinduism as the “best” religion to urging India to adopt a Hindu national identity. Their call to action could have come from average Hindus but the effectiveness of the four sadhus discussed below rests as much on their ideas and rhetoric as the fact they remained sadhus through and through. They enjoyed little organizational support (except in the case of the fourth sadhu, Guru Golwalkar), but their ideas became part of the ideological inheritance for many late 20th century sadhus.

SWAMI DAYANAND SARASWATI (1824—1883): RELIGIOUS SCHOLAR AND ATHEIST

Born in 1824 in an orthodox Brahmin family, Dayanand Saraswati (called Mool Shankar as a child) spent his early years in the Kathiawar region of what is now Gujarat. His father wanted him to follow the prescribed path of a true Brahmin and become a priest. Dayanand therefore spent most of his time studying Sanskrit and Hindu religious texts, including the Vedas. Legend has it that one night Dayanand witnessed a mouse pattering around and nibbling offerings near the feet of the idol of God Shiv. God’s “inability” to protect himself and his offerings from such a trivial creature is believed to have led Dayanand to question the authority of idols in general. He refused to participate in any Brahmanic religious ritual thereafter and strongly urged others in the family to give up worshipping weak Gods. A disillusioned and depressed Dayanand—further disenchanted after the death of his sister and a favorite uncle—rejected his father’s attempts to get him married and, at the age of 19, ran away from home on his search to find a “manly” god. He wandered around the country in the garb of a sadhu for about 15 years, practicing yoga, meeting ascetics and religious renunciators, looking for a guru who could help him discover the true religion. He found such a guru in Swami Vrijanand Saraswati, and in 1860 Mool Shankar became Swami Dayanand Saraswati.

The political context of the mid-19th century helps explain why Dayanand was so obsessed with the idea of finding the true, “manly” but hidden Hinduism. Dayanand was embarrassed that Hinduism and its idol worship, caste-system, and rampant ritualism met with derision among Muslims and Christians. He secretly admired the strength of Islam, the Mughals having conquered India with sheer military might. And he also was impressed by the British, who in their rule over India had demonstrated scientific and technological superiority and who were producing remarkable practical benefits for society at large. Perceiving Hinduism as weak and unable to block Hindus from being converted, Dayanand established the Arya Samaj in 1875 in Bombay and spread its philosophy aggressively. His goal was to show that true Hinduism was better than all alternatives put together.

True Hinduism resided in the Vedas, whereas all idol worship and ritualism were perversions. Furthermore, Dayanand held that Islam and Christianity could not be counted as religions because they did not measure up to the “neutral” standards laid down in the Vedas. Vedas’ standards were neutral and scientific because they conformed to nature’s laws devoid of miracles and so on. This elitist and Brahmanical interpretation, and the attempt to homogenize the diversity in Hindu beliefs and practices, was new; it shocked, and won many adherents. How did Dayanand achieve this and what were the impediments to Arya Samaj’s success as a religious revivalist movement that he established?

To understand Dayanand’s passion and initiative, it important also to understand the prevailing Western perception of India. According to Jyotirmaya Sharma,

“Western Indologists consolidated India’s image as despotic. . . . [At the same time] Indologists projected a highly romanticized vision of Indian society highlighted by the simple life, mysticism and harmony between man and nature. India was also seen as providing an almost unbroken tradition going back a few thousand years: in that sense it was taken to be a picture of living antiquity. . . . However, most Indologists did not abandon claims of European superiority over Indians. . . . Further, all Indologists showed little interest in contemporary India . . . [which] had lost track of its ancient ideals and was in a state of utter degeneration. . . . All Indologists acknowledged the prior claims of Christian revelation and the overall superiority of Christianity. A large part of Hindu tradition was seen to be superstitious, barbarous and savage”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006, pp. 15—16.

Dayanand fell for this interpretation or criticism and had to come up with a Golden Age of Vedic India. More accurately, he had to come with the objective truth of a true religion—which he found in the Vedas—without appearing to be partial to his own faith. He first went to great lengths to show why God had to be attribute-less, only one and without incarnations, and in accordance with the laws of nature (as Vedas had laid out). According to Dayanand Vedas were revealed (by God) in Sanskrit, the universal language or the mother of all languages. The Aryas of the Vedas once ruled the world but lost all their glory:

At the present moment, let alone governing foreign countries, the Aryas through indolence, negligence and mutual discord and ill-luck do not possess a free, independent, uninterrupted and fearless rule even over their own country. . . . When a country falls upon evil days, the natives have to bear untold misery and suffering. Say what you will, the indigenous native rule is by far the best. A foreign government, perfectly free from religious prejudices, impartial towards all—the natives and the foreigners—kind, beneficent and just to the natives can never render the people perfectly happy. It is extremely difficult to do away with differences in language, religion, education, customs and manners, but without doing that the people can never fully effect mutual good and accomplish their object. It behooves all good people to hold in due respect the teachings of the Veda and Shastras and ancient history.⁷⁹

Thus, “self-determination, nationality as well as ethnic and racial homogeneity formed an important part of Dayanand’s political agenda.”⁸⁰ By making Vedas to be the central and the only focus of Hinduism, Dayanand sought to unite Hindus who were divided over issues such as caste, customary laws (widow marriage, for example), and the powers of Hindu priests. However, Dayanand’s most practical innovation was the creation of a movement or institution called Shuddhi (purifying), which allowed all non-Hindus (not just the converted) to become Hindus. Many Shuddhi programs were carried out but the obstacle to Dayanand’s success was his elitism:

Dayanand’s Vedic religion—he preferred to call it Vedic religion instead of Hinduism—was one of exclusion. Sects as well as other schools of philosophy had to conform strictly to Dayanand’s interpretation of the Vedas. If they failed to so, they were subjected to scrutiny and criticism. While his vision might have been to unite Hinduism under the authority of the Vedas, what he proposed eliminated the possibility of a

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

pluralistic model of Hinduism. Non-adherence and dissent invited exclusion, at least in theory.⁸¹

Dayanand lashed out the founders of all Hindu religious sects and sects themselves, including Brahmin priests for distorting the Vedic idea of an abstract and attribute-less God. His indictment of religions other than Vedic was strident:

Dayanand concludes that the Christian God was not omniscient, omnipotent and universal. He was a limited and localized God. 'If he is indeed omniscient, why would he have created Satan', asks Dayanand. The Christian God was, therefore, responsible for all the evil deeds of Satan. [Referring to the Christian God telling Adam and Eve the lie they should not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil] Dayanand moves a step ahead. He argues that the Christian God himself was a Satan because he told lies and directed others to tell lies. . . . The Bible, insists Dayanand, was not even the work of a learned man, leave alone the word of God. The authors of the Bible, he asserts, were savages. They had no idea of the nature of true God. The Christian God was a 'flesh-eating trickster'; he was hardly God and more of a man. . . . In addition, Dayanand questions the very legitimacy of the Virgin Birth. 'This story is as possible as that recorded in the [Hindu] puranas about Kunti being conceived of the Sun . . . In short, Jesus was to be stripped of all claims to divinity, prophethood and spirituality. 'He was the son of a carpenter . . . who taught a few good things . . . but Jesus founded his religion in order to entrap others. He wanted to accomplish his object by ensnaring others into his net like a fisherman. Is there any wonder then if Christian missionaries follow their master in ensnaring other men into their religion? . . . Christianity was condemned to falsehood because it had not partaken of the light of the Vedas.

[As for Islam] Dayanand rejects the idea of the Qur'an was the word of God. He further rejects the idea of the God of Qur'an being merciful. Why? Because he sanctioned the killing of animals for food. Dayanand concludes that Muslims do evil deeds in the name of God. The Islamic attitude to infidels is cited as another instance of the of Qur'an as the word of God. . . . The infidels were considered enemies of God. A God who had enemies was no God at all. Muslims were apologetic iconoclasts. While they condemned image worshippers elsewhere, argues Dayanand, they themselves turned towards Kibla to worship. He called this 'image worship on a large scale.' Dayanand wanted them to break Kibla in the same manner that they would break other images. The picture painted of Islam and Muslims in the [book] Satyarthapraksh is one of lasciviousness, sensuality and licentiousness. In particular, the Prophet's marriage and the four wives permitted by Islam came in for his fire. . . . To Dayanand the Qu'ranic God was at the root of all evils. The Qu'ranic God, says Dayanand, could not keep Satan in check, since he let Satan's sins go unpunished. The Devil tempted all, and God was the tempter of the Devil. Hence God was the greater Devil of the two.⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 29—41.

But although Dayanand spewed venom against Christian Europeans, he admired them secretly. As Christophe Jaffrelot puts it:

While he criticized the way the Indian intelligentsia ‘copied’ European dress and manners, he admits that ‘The Europeans are very dutiful and well disciplined’ and that ‘these qualifications and deeds have contributed to their advancement... Dayanand calls on Hindus to ignore superficial aspects of European culture but to emulate its basic values. . . . The practices of Arya Samaj [such as the Shuddhi movement of converting people into the Hindu fold] became incorporated into a logic of cultural reform which could be termed a strategy of emulation. They contain a mimetic dimension, in so far as they imply a reform of Hinduism inspired by the values of its Western opponents. However, this imitation entails a strategy of assimilating those cultural traits which give the opponent his superiority and prestige in order to resist him more effectively, while pretending to discover such traits in one’s own ‘original civilization’ The Arya Samaj of Dayanand was not a proponent of Hindu nationalism. . . . However its ideological characteristics were such that it became one of the first crucibles of Hindu nationalism.⁸³

More broadly, Dayanand’s mission “was to demystify popular Hinduism completely in favor of a cerebral and formal notion of Vedic religion.” Popular myths and legends were to be discarded. “Faith had to be based on a solid foundation of reason as well as adherence to first principles as enunciated in the Vedas. Instead of worshipping stones, he asserts, Indians should have worshipped heroes and brave men in order to save themselves from the Muslim invasions [and British rule]”.⁸⁴

Worshipping Indian heroes was clearly a euphemism for Hindu nationalism. In Dayanand one finds the genesis of the Hindutva movement that led, over time, to the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992: just as “Hindutva secularizes Hinduism by sacralizing the nation”,⁸⁵ so also Dayanand tried to homogenize Hinduism and make India and Hindu heroes as new idols worth worshipping. But from a nationalist perspective his role can also be seen in a positive light as he is alleged to have popularized the ideas of self-rule (swaraj) and self-determination, concepts that inspired many Indians to fight against British rule.

⁸³ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1996, pp. 15—17.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸⁵ Ruthven, Malise, *Fundamentalism: A Very Short Introduction*, USA: Oxford University Press, 2007.

The Arya Samaj, which Dayanand founded, attracted “secular minded monks” and laypersons for whom Vedas, stripped down to the core, were the only source and content of their religiosity. That fact dovetailed well with Dayanand’s brand of atheism and the organization’s emphasis on secular activities helped it expand in India and abroad. Arya Samajis with their range of secular activities were also competing with Christian missionaries providing similar services. As Kenneth Jones puts it:⁸⁶

By 1947 the Arya Samaj had grown into a complex world of associations at the local, provincial and central levels. They maintained numerous institutions—schools, orphanages, student hostels, widows’ homes, reading rooms, libraries, publishing houses that issued tracts, newspapers, and journals, missionary societies, and various organizations dedicated to social reform. . . Institutional maintenance led the Samaj to declare itself as non-political, and to refrain from direct participation in nationalist campaigns. During the years 1905—1910, they were, however, labeled as seditious . . . and suspicions remained in the minds of many English officials until Independence, and not without reason.

Dayanand could well be regarded as an atheist, strident nationalist, and a religious scholar all bundled into one, brushing up against sensibilities of all religious communities. His elitism is revealed further in his defense of the formal but antiquated Varna system of the Vedas as opposed to the popular caste system, its corrupt form but a reality to reckon with. Arguing that the division of society ought to base itself on the four Vedic varnas reflecting qualifications, accomplishments, and character as opposed to birth in the modern caste system, he nevertheless reveals his authoritarian mindset when he claims that only the knowledgeable Brahmins or the warrior-like Kshatriya should be involved in politics. Most radically, he demolishes another popular notion and asserts that gods should not be worshipped. Instead, he permits “worship of five living gods: The mother, the father, the teacher, the altruistic teacher of humanity who would be learned, deeply religious and upright, and, finally, the husband’s worship of the wife and the wife’s worship of the husband.”⁸⁷

For Dayanand, there was no question of conversation, negotiation, and inter-faith dialogue. Despite his motivations to mobilize Hindus of all stripes, there was no reason to fire the

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 197.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

imagination of the common Hindu and the average sadhus. His embarrassment at being a common Hindu—embarrassed no doubt by the Christianity of the British rulers—led him to erect a magnificent edifice where religion itself did not matter. No wonder his elitism and individualism proved lethal. He was murdered in 1883 by someone sympathetic to Islam.

SRI AUROBINDO (1872—1950): WARRIOR AND MYSTICAL YOGI

As a mystic who theorized about and experimented with transforming human consciousness to a “higher” level, it is interesting to find Sri Aurobindo himself getting transformed from a lover of universal spirituality to a militant sadhu, calling on Muslims to subordinate their identity to a nation largely Hindu in nature. This is Aurobindo’s enigmatic story, interspersed with a subplot of a fierce revolutionary exhorting fellow Indians to adopt violent means to overthrow British rule. Although he, like Dayanand, was also fascinated with the Vedas, he was interested more in their underlying psychological insights—he equated nationalism with spiritualism—rather than the formal Truths and laws of nature that obsessed Dayanand. But like Dayanand, he too struck out on his own in a fierce individualistic way, earning him the title of an “extremist”. Unlike most nationalists of his times in the Indian National Congress, he urged the Indian youth to resort—as he himself did—to violence and revolutionary attacks against British officials.

Aurobindo Ghose was born in 1872, during a time of rising anti-British fervor. His anglicized father wanted Aurobindo to be shielded from all Indian influences and sent the seven year old Aurobindo Ghose to England to study Latin and Greek. Aurobindo also mastered ancient, mediaeval, and modern European literature, history, and politics. In England he was radicalized in the company of other Indians—part of a secret society called the ‘Lotus and Dagger’—the first Indian British MP, Dadabhai Naoroji, theosophists, and Irish dissidents at the forefront of struggle against British rule. His association with Naoroji—later the prime minister of non-British Baroda and the President of Indian National Congress (INC)—helped him land a job as a civil servant in Baroda from where Aurobindo—perhaps the first nationalist to do so—started writing openly against British rule in an undisguised vitriolic manner. After leaving Baroda for Bengal in 1905, Aurobindo started organizing secret revolutionary cells and helped engineer violent bomb attacks against British sympathizers. Jailed in 1908, he began to reinterpret the Hindu religious text Gita, and underwent a radical transformation. Nationalism, religion, and

spirituality became synonymous. What was at stake for him was not just freeing India from British rule, but of India internalizing, evolving, and transforming its civilizational identity in practical terms and taking it to its highest level. In short, India had to discover its self and develop the inner capacity to shape and transform and evolve its essential identity, as in the yogic idea of evolving consciousness into super-consciousness. :

[I]t was always in the first instance in religion (specifically of course in Hinduism) that . . . Aurobindo located the soul of the nation. To [him], unless a national revival was spiritually expressed, a people was in effect embodying the self of another people. ‘Indians, it is the spirituality of India . . . that must us free and great’, Aurobindo cried (Karmayogin, 20—1). And again, as ‘nationalism is a religion that has come from God’ (*Speeches*, 6), it should be expressed as a spiritual discipline or *sadhana* demanding complete sacrifice (yajna) from the devotee (*Doctrine*, 69—79). . . Only through ‘[learning] a more sacred truth and [commanding] a diviner impulse’ might nationalism rid itself of the paralysis not only of European materialism but of its own backward-looking intellectualism (*Karmayogin*, 21—2).

Nationality in fact was seen as a higher form of spirituality, as is evident from [his] interpretation of *dharma*—literally, the right way of being—as, specifically, an all-pervading form of national ‘righteousness’ . . . To achieve freedom and unity, he wrote, Indians should ‘devote’ themselves to *dharma*, the manifestation of spirituality in politics; religion and politics were the ‘two most effective and vital expressions of the nation’s self’.⁸⁸

It is easy to see why Muslims distanced themselves from this rhetoric. But average sadhus also disregarded Aurobindo as yet another pusher of an elite interpretation of yoga for narrow ends. Where, for instance, did devotion and rituals and celebrations feature in Aurobindo’s worldview?

Instead of engaging with other sadhus, Aurobindo attacked the common tendency of Indians to accept uncritically whatever the West or the Indians themselves had passed down in the name of science and religious authority. For him, Indians had to become truly young again and challenge all inherited traditions if they were to compete against the experimental West as well as against the ossified India. In Indian religious terminology, the “young” was a euphemism for “kshatriyas”, or Hindus who were endowed with warrior-like attributes in spirit and action. Once such warriors had shed the baggage of inherited education they, Aurobindo argued, were ready for the highest political cause—nationalism.

⁸⁸ Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 110—111.

Politics is the work of the Kshatriya and it is to the virtues of the Kshatriya we must develop if we are to be morally fit for freedom. But the first virtue of the Kshatriya is not to bow his neck to an unjust yoke but to protect his weak and suffering countrymen against the oppressor and welcome death in a just and righteous battle.⁸⁹

Jyoirmaya Sharma, makes the following historical comparison in an essay titled ‘The Bourgeois and the Samurai’ to underscore Aurobindo’s attempts to look outside the Hindu tradition while becoming conscious of India as a nation:

[O]f the two nations [Japan and India] that had come under European influence, Japan had become a great nation, while India, despite its more ancient and splendid past remained weak and dependent. The Japanese were able to remain faithful to their ancient traditions; the dynamic spirit of the samurai was able to mould the new knowledge that came from Europe and blend it with these traditions to suit the social and political needs of the nation.

In contrast . . . India had failed to reconstruct itself and bring about a self-revival with the help of Europe’s modernity. . . The moderation, good sense, peace, orderliness and sense of stability of the bourgeois were attributes inadequate for ‘great adventures, tremendous enterprises, lofty achievements, the storm and stress of mighty and eventful periods in national activity’. Only heroes, martyrs, criminals, enthusiasts, degenerates, geniuses, men of exaggerated virtue, exaggerated ability and exaggerated ideas were capable of revolutionizing society and making a nation great and free. Kshatriyahood alone could make men dare and do impossible things and, in turn, produce men of extremes, men of faith, prophets, crusaders, rebels, reckless doers and desperate adventurers. The kshatriya principle, the Indian equivalent of the samurai one, needed light, room and air.⁹⁰

Psychologically speaking, Aurobindo extolled the fighting spirit of the kshatriya minus the despondent swing that characterized even the warrior Arjuna in the battlefield—faced with an enemy constituted by his own family members—in the Hindu epic Mahabharat. He, like Arjuna’s charioteer, urges Indian warriors to fight—even in violent ways—in a disinterested way, that is, without a sense of attachment with what that action might lead to. According to Aurobindo, the most extreme and visceral action can result only when the warrior fights with a sense of intrinsic duty, *dharma*, or a code of right conduct—not for his friends or against foes,

⁸⁹ Quoted in Jyotimaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006, p. 50.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 50—51.

but with the ideal Aryan attitude of disinterested action: “Narayana [God] is everywhere, so whom shall I hate or whom shall I despise?”⁹¹

But Aurobindo still had to contend with the practical issue of why the kshatriya should fight in the first place. For Aurobindo, Indians had nothing but their *individualism* as their greatest strength:

Every detail of our life has been fixed for us by Shashtra [religious texts] and custom . . . Only in one field, that of individual spiritual experience, have we cherished the ancient freedom and originality out of which our past greatness sprang; it is from some new movement in this inexhaustible source that every fresh impulse and rejuvenated strength has arisen.⁹² . . . The will of a single hero can breathe courage into the hearts of a million cowards.⁹³

For Aurobindo, Indians had to discover their *individualistic* spirit, and fight their own weakness and unmanliness, in order to bring about a complete transformation of India—in a spiritual sense of finding its identity and raising its self-consciousness to a higher level; in a scientific sense (the seeds of which, according to him, were already present); and in a nationalistic sense of finding that which may unite all Indians. According to Aurobindo, only dare-devils, the Kshatriya, men of extremes, rebels, reckless doers, men of intense faith and crusaders could embody true patriotism:

Patriotism was, thus, a national religion. Nationalism, too, was not a mere political programme but a religion. . . National awakening was impossible without a religious awakening. Politics too had to be based on religion. Aurobindo imparted this argument a prophetic twist when he asserted that the need was to ‘recognize that politics is religion and infuse it with the spirit of religion’. . . Swaraj, freedom, was not, therefore, to be seen as an aspiration for political liberty alone. It was to be seen as the final fulfillment of the Vedantic ideal in politics [that politics is religion], a realization of the ancient life of India under modern conditions. . . . This national religion had to be universal.⁹⁴

But asserting unilaterally that “national religion *had* to be universal” based on the “ancient life of India” did not make it so. Not only did such views find no takers among Muslims, but the

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 57.

⁹² Sri Aurobindo, *India's Rebirth*, Paris and Mysore: Institut de Recherches Evolutive, p. 82.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 142.

⁹⁴ Jyotimaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006, pp. 60—61.

average Hindu, including the average sadhu, and the non-kshatriya found such elitist ideas to be ramblings of an overly zealous monk.

Aurobindo, even after he came out of Alipore jail in 1909, was constantly under British surveillance, particularly because he continued to publish two politically threatening weeklies, *Karmayogin* and *Dharma*. In 1910 Aurobindo fled to Pondicherry, a French colony in southern India. There, he continued his political writings through his journal *Arya*, but over time he became more preoccupied with spiritual reflection and yogic practices, adopting, towards the end of his life, a Hindu nationalism of the intolerant kind.

How did this happen? His spiritualism led him to the idea that indivisible divinity “resided” in every individual. In its outwardly form Hinduism was to embrace all religions because divinity was present in all, not just in Hindus. But at the same time, Aurobindo argued:

Hinduism has always been pliable and aggressive; it has thrown itself on the attacking force, carried its positions . . . Whenever it has stood on the defensive, it has contracted within narrower limits and shown temporary signs of decay . . . Kshatriya ‘masculinity’, rather than the Gandhian notion of ahimsa [non-violence or harmlessness] and self-denial would be the impulses to bring about this assimilation.

In other words, Hinduism had to assert itself. But the nationalistic desire for exclusiveness within the nation did not pass over Aurobindo, who would declare as a rule that people living in a certain territory must hold that land sacred. It is here where his universalism began to crumble:

The Mahomedans base their separateness and their refusal to regard themselves as Indians first and Mahomedans afterwards on the existence of great Mahomedan nations to which they feel themselves more akin, in spite of our common birth and blood, than to us. . . Our ideal therefore is an Indian Nationalism, largely Hindu in its spirit and traditions, because the Hindu made the land and the people and persists, by the greatness of his past, his civilization and his culture and his invincible virility, in holding it, but wide enough to include the Moslem and his culture and traditions and absorb them into itself. . . Every time the mildness of Hindus has given way. The best solution would be to allow the Hindus organize themselves and the Hindu-Muslim unity would take care of itself.⁹⁵

As we will see later, Guru Golwalkar and others in the RSS took up seriously Aurobindo’s notion of a sacred land and Hindus organizing themselves. Aurobindo was getting increasingly

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 66—67.

impatient with the inability of “kshatriyas” or even average Hindus to fight religious conversions by the Muslims—mainly because there was no agreed-upon method in Hinduism for conversion or reconversion Aurobindo declares: “The only way to make the Muslims ‘harmless’ was to make them lose their fanatical attachment to their religion.”⁹⁶

Aurobindo asserted that the religion of the Muslims was nothing special; Muslims had not contributed much except in the fields of architecture, poetry, and art; and India had assimilated many religious communities so it could assimilate Muslims also. According to Aurobindo:

The [Hindu-Muslim] conflict is in the outer life and unless the Mahomedans learn tolerance I do not think assimilation is possible. . . . If the Muslims were to be placated it would amount to abandonment of the greatness of India’s past and her spirituality.⁹⁷

Nationalism, couched earlier in spiritual terms, starts to resemble communalism. It is no wonder that supposedly liberal and secular political leaders started calling him intolerant and non-secular. But Aurobindo was too much of a fighter not to attack the self-proclaimed democrats of his time, those in the Congress who resented his revolutionary and “extremist” ways:

The Congress at the present stage—what is it but a Fascist organization? Gandhi is the dictator like Stalin, I won’t say like Hitler: what Gandhi says they accept and even the Working Committee follows him; then it goes to the All-India Congress committee which adopts it, and then the Congress. There is no opportunity for any differences of opinion, except for Socialists who are allowed to differ provided they don’t seriously differ. Whatever resolutions they pass are obligatory on all the provinces whether the resolution suit the provinces or not; there is no room for any other *independent* opinion [emphasis mine].⁹⁸

As is clear, independence and individualism were Aurobindo’s hallmarks. So obsessed was he to dive deep and alone in the divisive world of politics and the ocean of spirituality, he surfaced with a worldview dividing Hindus from the Muslims. It was also an individualistic leap, remaining alone without forging organizational relationships with other sadhus and institutions. As we will see, Swami Vivekanand and Guru Golwalkar did pick up his exaggerated rhetoric but tried to build a semblance of an organization around it. Aurobindo theorized alone, fought alone,

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

⁹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *India’s Rebirth*, Paris and Mysore: Institut de Recherches Evolutive, p. 207.

and died as a recluse in 1950. As an individualistic sadhu, he could not transcend the contradiction between being a warrior and a mystical yogi at the same time.

SWAMI VIVEKANAND: 1863-1902. MULTICULTURALIST AND UNAPOLOGETIC NATIONALIST

Narendranath Dutta, as Vivekanand was known before he became a sadhu, was born in 1863 in an orthodox Hindu family from Calcutta. As a child and as a young man Narendranath was an eclectic genius who excelled in academics, music, theatre, and wrestling while showing deep interest in spiritualism and meditation. After studying comparative philosophy and history of European nations at the Presidency College and Scottish Church College in Calcutta, he joined the Hindu reformist organization Brahma Samaj briefly. But all his achievements paled in comparison with what took place after his encounter with the sadhu Ramakrishna Paramhans in 1881. Narendranath became Swami Vivekanand but, in a dramatic contrast with his own guru, the “effeminate” Paramhans,⁹⁹ he became, like Dayanand and Aurobindo, an aggressive nationalist on a search for India’s essence:

Vivekanand believed that each nation, like each individual, “has one theme in its life, which is its centre, the principle note around which every other note comes to form the harmony. In one nation political power is its vitality, as in England, artistic life in another and so on. In India religious life forms the centre, the keynote of the whole music of national life”.¹⁰⁰

Vivekanand could never come to terms with the pluralistic idea that people of other faiths, particularly Muslims, were an essential or integral parts of India’s religious life. His nationalistic journey begins with the patronage he received from his influential disciples in America. How Vivekanand befriended them is somewhat unclear and beside the point; what is most well recorded are his speeches at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. The basic point there—based not on deep experiences with other religions as was the case with his guru Paramhans—was that religions differed only in their methods of achieving a common goal. At the same time, ironically, Vivekanand stressed Hinduism’s superiority by pointing to historical evidence: he claimed it had never persecuted or converted people of other faiths, and that the

⁹⁹ During the course of his many religious experiments Paramhans tried also to internalize the identity of Lord Krishna’s consort Radha, in an attempt to mimic sexual but spiritual union with the One. The “effeminate” label refers to that aspect of Paramhans’s life.

¹⁰⁰ Girilal Jain, *The Hindu Phenomenon*, Delhi: UBS Publishers’ Distributors Ltd, 1994, p. 46.

country of Hindus had given shelter to believers of other religions. Hinduism, according to him therefore, had the moral legitimacy to teach other religions even though they were equally true (but not as evolved as Hinduism). It co-opted other religions, since “That which exists is One; sages call it by various names.”¹⁰¹ So Hinduism was like the proverbial elephant and prophets and messiahs of other religions were blindfolded ones who mistook parts of the elephant as the whole. His denunciation of prophets of other religions assumes a sectarian note when he shows that they were novice yogis who stumbled momentarily upon a super-conscious state as opposed to a trained Hindu yogi who wills it:

Mohammed claimed that the Angel Gabriel came to him in a cave and took him on the heavenly horse, Harak, and he visited the heavens. But with all that, Mohammed spoke some wonderful truths. If you read the Koran, you will find the most wonderful truths [about equality] mixed with superstitions. How will you explain it? That man was inspired, no doubt, but that inspiration was, as it were stumbled upon. He was not a trained Yogi, and did not the reason of what he was doing. Think of the good Mohammed did to the world, and think of the great evil that has been done through his fanaticism!¹⁰² . . . Now Mohammedans . . . are the most sectarian. Their watchword is, ‘There is one God and Mohammed is His Prophet.’ Everything beyond that, not only is bad, but must be destroyed forthwith; at a moment’s notice, every man or woman who does not belong to this worship must be immediately broken; every book that teaches anything else must be burnt. From the Pacific to the Atlantic, for five hundred years blood ran all over the world. That is Mohammedanism!¹⁰³

Vivekanand was not the universalist that he claimed to be, or at least, did not hesitate to criticize non-Hindus. Hinduism and trained Hindu Yogis were superior, but Hindu society had suffered because of Muslim persecution. Christianity came under scrutiny also but in less harsh ways: Vivekanand condemned the conversion practices of missionaries and their preoccupation with the idea that the sectarian Christian God would one day bring harmony and rule the world.¹⁰⁴ In short, his vacillating position between “tolerating” and accepting all religions on the one hand, and blaming them for spawning intolerance and ironically arresting the evolution of a perfectly evolved Hindu society, lies at the heart of Vivekanand’s agony and his nationalistic spirit. Also, while Islam and Christianity preached equality—Vivekanand attacked that position from within

¹⁰¹ Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006, p. 77.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 82—83.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

by asking equality of what and for what sake? According to him only Hinduism posits that all individual souls are part and parcel of the (Vedantic) Universal Soul: “Therefore in injuring his neighbour, the individual actually injures himself. This is the basic metaphysical truth underlying all ethical codes [of treating others as equals].”¹⁰⁵

Trumpeting Hinduism as a tolerant, pacifist, and egalitarian religion—at complete odds with the realities of the caste system—Vivekanand, echoing Aurobindo and anticipating Golwalkar, brings out the narrowness of territorial-based nationalism:

In his [1897 public lecture at the Floral Hall in Colombo] . . . he pronounced India to be the *punya bhoomi* [sacred land], the land where all souls aspiring towards a spiritual quest must come to attain their last home. This was the land, he felt, where all souls must invariably come to account for their karma. India was *punya bhoomi* because humanity here had attained the highest summits in gentleness, generosity, purity, calmness, introspection and spirituality. The world owed much to the ‘mild Hindu’, who exemplified these qualities.¹⁰⁶

How did this prophet of the ‘mild Hindu’ become a proponent of muscular Hinduism?

The first step was to show that genuine religious pluralism, where Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and other faiths mattered equally—or that Hinduism was as good as other religions—led to the “madness of confluence of races”¹⁰⁷ diluting the one central theme of a nation’s life, a religion presided over by intellectual Hindu Brahmins well versed in the Vedas. This Vivekanand had already shown.

The second step was to argue that the Hindu hierarchical caste system—understood in its pure Vedic form—actually promoted diversity and expression of real individuality. How was that possible? Vivekanand invoked what now has become the hackneyed nationalist mythology of “unity in complexity”. If qualities of an individual—as opposed to the privilege of birth, the original Vedic idea—were to find unfettered expression then lower caste Hindus, motivated by bettering their socio-economic status, would find ways to unite with the upper caste comrades through individual initiatives. In fact, according to Vivekanand:

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 92.

[It] was the duty of the Brahmin to work for the salvation of the rest of the mankind. As long as the Brahmin did that, he was worthy of being called a Brahmin. The Brahmin had been a trustee of the ‘accumulated culture of ages. It was his duty to spread that culture among all people.¹⁰⁸

So all Hindus would want to become manly Kshatriyas and knowledgeable Brahmins. Diversity in starting points would be overshadowed by a promised unity. To be sure, there was a religious or a theological argument also at work here: Vivekanand could never reconcile the dualism or devotional aspect of his guru Paramhans with his abstract non-dualistic idea of God; by invoking “unity in complexity” he co-opted his guru and all religious philosophies in one sweep.

The third and final step was to establish a relationship between Hindus’ unity in complexity with muscular nationalism. According to Vivekanand the essential personality of India (its unity) had already been assumed or established—it was a Hindu nation; so whatever empirical complexities or diversities existed in practice and religious speculation they “somehow” merged to produce that one unity.

Is it not the multitude of cells in the body that make up the personality? . . . brain-centres, not the one, that produce consciousness? . . . Unity in complexity! Just so!¹⁰⁹ . . . There cannot be two [or many] infinities, for they would limit each other and would become finite.”¹¹⁰

If that “unity” was not allowed to emerge and blossom, force and violence were justified, not love and piety.

Look at this nation and see what has been the outcome of such attempt. Through the preaching of that love broadcast, the whole nation has become effeminate—a race of women! . . . The people are very good only at crying and weeping; that has become their national trait. Look at their literature, the sure index of a nation’s thoughts and ideas. Why, the refrain of Bengali literature for four hundred years is strung to that same tune of moaning and crying. It has failed to give birth to any poetry which breathes a true heroic spirit.¹¹¹

Or, as Jain quoting Vivekanand says:

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 99.

You will understand the [religious epic] Gita better with your biceps . . . What I want is muscles of iron and nerves of steel, inside which dwells a mind of the same material of which the thunderbolt is made. Strength, manhood, Kshatriya-vira [the virility of the Kshatriya] and Brahmateja [the fiery wisdom of the Brahmin].¹¹²

Or, to put it differently, violence and the “eye for an eye” principle may be used by the non-renouncer or the average Hindu householder to help prevent the nation’s defining unity from splintering into a complex and a meaningless diversity.

At this stage Vivekanand, for reasons that may not be obvious at the outset, started taking contradictory positions in the name of Practical Vedanta. But the hidden nationalist agenda was too strong to camouflage. The ‘old’ Hinduism, according to him:

Preached lofty ideals of human dignity on the one hand, and ‘treads upon the necks of the poor and the low’.¹¹³ . . . In his love for God, man had forgotten to love his own fellow beings . . . and frequently kill other human beings in the name of God. . . In India too, *the real nation* [emphasis mine] that lived in the humble village but had been forgotten. The common people in India had suffered oppression for thousands of years. They had withstood this without a murmur, with infinite patience, boundless love and immense practicality. Their state had a lot to do with the ‘tyranny of the sages’ . . . We have brains, but no hands. We have the doctrine of Vedanta, but we have not the power to reduce it into practice. In our books there is the doctrine of universal equality, but in work we make great distinctions. It was in India that unselfish and disinterested work of the most exalted type was preached, but in practice we are awfully cruel, awfully heartless—unable to think anything besides our own mass-of-flesh bodies.¹¹⁴

Now how are we to make sense of Vivekanand’s sudden “leftward” turn and concern for the “poor and the low”? Although this spirit was infused in the educational, medicinal, and relief services provided by the organization he established, the Ramakrishna Mission, we still have to understand the place of manly nationalism and Hindu religion in Vivekanand’s concern for the “*the real nation* [emphasis mine] that lived in the humble village but had been forgotten.” Given that the humble or mild Hindu villagers were deeply religious in nature, the solution to their problem had to come from religious but not socio-economic quarters. Religion is the issue, not economics of the village or caste exploitation:

¹¹² Girilal Jain, *The Hindu Phenomenon*, Delhi: UBS Publishers’ Distributors Ltd, 1994, p. 45.

¹¹³ Jyotimaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006, p. 107.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 112—113.

For our own motherland a junction of the great systems, Hinduism and Islam—Vedanta brain and Islam body is the only hope.¹¹⁵

And so we are back to “motherland”—a particularly difficult concept for most Muslims to internalize—to the intellectual superiority of Hinduism serviced by the Kshatriya-like body of Islam, another caste-based concept that is difficult for Muslims to accept. By implication, only Hindu nationalism could solve the problems of the day. However, Vivekanand’s statement about Hinduism as Vedanta and Islam working together were ambiguous enough to have inspired many Hindu and Muslim nationalists to fight British rule.

Swami Vivekanand died in 1902 in Calcutta at the young age of 39. Building on the services provided by Dayanand’s Arya Samaj, and in competition with Christian missionaries, Vivekanand further institutionalized the social service outreach by creating many Rama Krishna Ashrams throughout Indian and abroad. His emphasis on virile Hinduism inspired Guru Golwalkar of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is believed to have been the guiding force behind the BJP and the Ayodhya movement.

GURU GOLWALKAR (1906—1973): SADHU AS A PROTEAN FASCIST

The three sadhus just discussed believed that Hinduism (or Vedanta) was the best religion, the only true religion; that it defined the identity of India; and that Hindus needed to assert that pride if they were to overcome humiliation and stupor created by hundreds or even thousands of years of Muslim and British rule. Although the idea—“say it with pride that you are Hindu”—became a powerful mobilizing slogan during the Ayodhya conflict, Guru Golwalkar and the early founders of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh—or RSS, the parent organization of the political party BJP and its religious wing, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad or VHP—were not obsessed with proving that Hinduism was “the best.” They were interested in organizing Hindu society from below and influencing the mindset of the Hindu youth so that political power would fall into their laps.

There are two diametrically opposed views about Golwalkar, a sadhu influenced by Vivekanand and initiated in the same order by a direct disciple of Vivekanand’s guru, Swami Ramkrishna Paramhans. In the first view, Golwalkar is a fascist, pure and simple, who, as its second head,

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

helped consolidate a fascist Hindu nationalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS/National Volunteer Organization).¹¹⁶ In this view, Golwalkar's Hindu nationalism—articulated in ethnic, cultural, racist, and religious terms—promised to halt the decline of Hindu society (ignoring class and caste conflicts altogether); questioned a democratic state based on individual rights; and urged uncritical allegiance of activists to a militant ideology. In the second view Golwalkar is simply a protean sadhu who, driven no doubt by an anti-Muslim sentiment, uses his stature as a sadhu to influence society from below but not the state.

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar was born in 1906 and spent his childhood in Nagpur, the city where the headquarters of RSS is located today. Eight of his brothers and sisters died before reaching adulthood. His father was a clerk in the government and then a professional schoolteacher, and his mother was a pious Hindu housewife. The only fact we know about Golwalkar's youth is that he, like the other three sadhus discussed earlier, was an exceptionally gifted academic, well versed in Hindi, Marathi, English, and comparative religion. After obtaining Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in Zoology at the Banaras Hindu University, he taught there for a short while, before returning to Nagpur to complete his degree in law. He was devoted to his students, and long before being initiated as a sadhu in 1937 in the Ramakrishna Ashram, his students gave him the title of Guru, or enlightened teacher. But at the insistence of Bhaiyyaji Dani, an RSS activist at the university, and the university's prominent founder and Hindu leader, Madan Mohan Malviya, Golwalkar left his teaching job and joined the RSS leadership.

Jaffrelot's analysis—concerning Golwalkar's joining the RSS—is focused mostly on showing a correlation between Golwalkar's political views and that of European fascists *via* the Hindu nationalist leader V. D. Savarkar, who had influenced RSS in its founding years. A small incident about Savarkar may illustrate his long-term influence on Golwalkar. As a twelve-year boy, Jaffrelot writes, Savarkar harbored visceral anti-Muslim hatred, leading his schoolmates to help destroy a village mosque:

¹¹⁶ According to the standard view of a fascist, it is: “[a] form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.” [Robert O. Paxton, “The Anatomy of Fascism,” 2004]. *Source: Online Etymology Dictionary*, © 2001 Douglas Harper, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/fascist>.

This was Savarkar's revenge against the 'atrocities' committed against Hindus during the Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay and Pune in 1894—95 and earlier in Azamgarh in 1893. . . [Dhananjay Keer's] gushing narrative of this incident speaks of the boys, led by Savarkar, showering stones on the mosque, shattering its windows and tiles and returning triumphant.¹¹⁷

The Italian fascist who had an indirect but a lifelong on Golwalkar was Giuseppe Mazzini,. Sharma states Mazzini's core idea thus:

The idea of national liberty was central to Mazzini's thought. For him, liberty and the individual were sacred. He, however, sought to replace individualism with the idea of the epoch of the peoples finding their natural manifestation in the collective life of nationality. The primary prerequisites of nationality were the acknowledgement of being indigenous within a state and the principle of unity. Without unity, Mazzini asserted, there was no true nation, no real strength and no genuine ability to fight one's powerful enemies. This unity was of free men and women who were equals but it also entailed a harmony between heaven and earth, between religion and politics. While there was room for respect for religious beliefs of other 'nations', it was imperative that any future political organization of the nation should ensure unity of religious belief.¹¹⁸

The RSS which Golwalkar nurtured was founded in 1925. .¹¹⁹ Golwalkar's central theoretical point is conveyed in the following quote which show the influence of German ethnic nationalism on him:

It [the nation] is a union of masses of men of different occupations and social states, in a hereditary society of common spirit, feeling and race bound together especially by a language and customs in a common civilization which gives them the sense of unity and distinction from all foreigners, quite apart from the bond of the state. . .¹²⁰

And in Golwalkar's own words:

To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of semitic races—the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for Races and

¹¹⁷ Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006, p. 124.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 152—153.

¹¹⁹ According to my RSS contacts, Golwalkar left the Hindu Mahasabha to become the second chief of RSS due to personality conflicts—Savarkar, it is believed, eclipsed all others in the organization. Coincidentally, Dr. K. B. Hedgewar, the founder and the first chief of the RSS, had also left Mahasabha after serving served as vice president under Savarkar. The differences among three character pale in comparison with what they share in common at intellectual and political levels. As far caste is concerned, they were all upper caste and aggressive Brahmins who saw the virtues of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya as complementary.

¹²⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1996, p. 53--54.

cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by. . . The foreign races [that is., Indian Muslims] in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion [which they renounced], must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture [which they left] . . . or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights.¹²¹

The ultimate vision of our work [...] is a perfectly organized state of society wherein each individual has been moulded into a model of ideal Hindu manhood and made into a living limb of the corporate personality of society.¹²²

In order to bring about such a society-wide transformation the RSS, Golwalkar believed that India had to orient itself around “disinterested and individualistic” sadhus. To that end, the martial institution of the sadhus, the akharas, could inculcate discipline among RSS youth, and the preachers and trainers [pracharaks] of the RSS would adopt the role of undistracted celibate sadhus who would care for one thing and one thing alone: how to slowly make others free of their familial responsibilities for the sake of the nation. The growth of this nation was to depend on the strength and altruism of youth, and accordingly, the movement found great support among young people and parents concerned about building their children's character. Golwalkar saw the rebuilding of the individual and society as a long-term goal, and claimed to disavow short-term political gains: He downplayed the role of the state, and in contrast fascism and Nazism, Golwalkar did not emphasize the role of the leader as well. The RSS that Golwalkar developed was nevertheless “authoritarian in its emphasis on discipline, in its refusal to recognize the specific character of minorities and in its intention of reforming Hindu mentality absolutely to prepare the advent of a new man, implying the need to extend the sway of the organization over the whole of society.”¹²³

In order to achieve such far reaching transformation, Golwalkar strengthened the *shakha*, the basic unit of RSS. As Jaffrelot explains:

¹²¹ Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar and Sambuddha Sen, *Khakhi Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993, pp. 26—27.

¹²² Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1996, p. 59.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62—64.

From its inception, the basic unit of the RSS has been the *shakha* (local branch), which in the beginning, had a close affinity to the *akharas*. The term *akhara* designates a place where the young men of a locality gather daily for body-building, exercise, and sports—mainly wrestling—and weight lifting. In this guise the *akhara* retains a ritual dimension—even a spiritual one. It includes a temple—when not attached to one—that is generally dedicated to Hanuman [the monkey god, a symbol of strength and devotion, in the epic *Ramayana*]; it is placed under the authority of a *guru* who instructs the members of the *akhara* in physical and mental discipline, giving them a certain balance that also implies abstinence . . . [of a *sadhu*]. Members of an *akhara* are recruited from all social milieux and develop a strong collective attachment to it.¹²⁴

Young men and boys, he tells us, begin with ‘*Bhartiya* [Hindu term for India] games’ in an ‘open playground under a saffron flag [associated with the Hindu warrior king Shivaji]’. Then ‘the leader’s whistle or order has a magical effect on them: there is an instant perfect order and silence.’ There is next a round of physical exercises—*lathi* [long stick], *suryanamaskar* [sun worship/obeisance to sun], marching, etc., followed by collective singing a patriotic song. ‘Discussions follow. They delve deep into the problems affecting national life. And finally they stand in a row and recite the prayer: Many salutations to thee, O loving Motherland!’ The proceedings end with ‘*Bharat mata ki jai*’ [victory to mother India].¹²⁵

Through repetitive rituals such as these, Golwalkar tried to perfect the technique of habit formation, by instilling in its young members a “constant meditation of [an] ideal, . . . [a] constant company of persons devoted to the same ideal . . . and engaging the body in activities congenial to that ideal. *Shakhas*, therefore, orient the body, the mind and the immediate environment entirely on identical lines.”¹²⁶ According to Basu:

Through its emphasis on games, physical culture, and an uncritical nationalist education, RSS, under Golwalkar’s leadership sought to offer a corporate identity to young boys in overcrowded neighborhoods and to fiercely competitive small “traders, shopkeepers, clerks and petty professionals.”¹²⁷

The close integration of the RSS organization with religious nationalism and discipline led to a dramatic deepening and growth of the *shakhas* throughout the country. From a handful of *shakhas* in the late 1920s in Maharashtra where RSS was founded, there were close to 60,000

¹²⁴ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1996, p. 35.

¹²⁵ Tapan Basu (et. al.), *Khakhi Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993, p. 34.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

active RSS *swayamsevaks* or volunteers around the time of India's independence. Under Golwalkar, this huge decentralized network had become an actual community.

Golwalkar gained prominence after the Partition of India in 1947. The communal holocaust that followed was blamed not only on the separatist Muhammed Ali Jinnah of the All India Muslim League but also on Mahatma Gandhi of the Indian National Congress. RSS's relief work among Hindus who had been displaced from Pakistan gave it a legitimacy that soon crumbled after the assassination of Gandhi in 1948 by a RSS sympathizer. RSS was banned by the Congress government but won its legal right to exist the very next year, to work in the cultural as opposed to the political sphere.

Besides building RSS into a national level enterprise, Golwalkar's next organizational contribution towards the "Hindu cause" was his role in the founding of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP/World Hindu Council) in 1964, as a religious arm of the RSS which was central player during the RJB campaign in late 80's and early 90's. Although formed as a reaction against secessionist movement led by Christian converts in the northeast, the VHP as an organization had the usual mandate of consolidating and strengthening Hindu society and spreading Hindu values among Hindus in India and abroad.

Golwalkar's background as a sadhu and his scientific training found expression in VHP's organizational strategy, "to combine the asceticism of a sadhu with the dynamism of the modern technological age in its endeavour to revitalize Hinduism."¹²⁸ Despite such lofty aims, only a handful of sadhus were associated with it in any meaningful way. Unlike his success in strengthening RSS as an organization, Golwalkar could not achieve much in attracting the many individualistic sadhus to become VHP activists. VHP was far more successful in its activities outside India. Within India its activities, till Golwalkar's death in 1973, remained confined to tribal and peripheral areas in anti-religious conversion drives, far removed from the public gaze. VHP and sadhus associated with it had to wait till the 1980s before coming on the national scene in a collective manner.

¹²⁸ Manjari Katju, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003, p. 7.

An insight into Golwalkar's mind is also provided by his admirers. His most ardent Western supporter is Dr. Koenraad Elst, a Belgian philosopher and writer.¹²⁹ He argues that Golwalkar—like many world leaders during his times—had, in fact, supported the Zionist movement and the creation of Israel as a Jewish State. Equating Hindus with Jews, he quotes:

The Jews had maintained their race, religion, culture and language; and all they wanted was their natural territory to complete their Nationality.¹³⁰

[Although Golwalkar's] Hindutva is a fairly crude ideology, borrowing heavily from European nationalisms with their emphasis on homogeneity . . . [u]nder the conditions of British colonialism, it was inevitable that some such form of Hindu nationalism would arise . . . [But] there is a larger effort to rewrite India's history and to whitewash Islam. [Elst] says that the goal and methods of this alleged history rewriting is similar with the denial of the Nazi holocaust, and that in India, jihad[i] negationists are in control of the academic establishment and of the press. . . . [T]he . . . tendency to accuse Hindu movements of "fascism" is nothing but a "replay of an old colonial tactic."¹³¹

The defining theme of Golwalkar's worldview, according to Elst, is that a nation's mainstream life must generally be shared by all—and organized if it is to be sustained—even when people differ over modes of worship and a variety of other things. In Golwalkar's words:

There is no question of the ascendancy of any one [religious group]. What we want is a healthy society. Ours is a Constitution which gives equal rights to all and there is no need to amend the Constitution. The Hindu is born secular. He accepts the truth that there are different paths to God realization.¹³²

The word Hindu is not merely 'religious'. It denotes a 'people' and their highest values of life. We, therefore, in our concept of nation, emphasize a few basic things : unqualified devotion to the motherland and our cultural ideals, pride in our history which is very ancient [that is, before Muslim warriors invaded India], respect for our great forefathers [much earlier than Mahmud of Ghazni], and lastly, a determination in every one of us to build up a common life of prosperity and security. The word Hindu State is unnecessarily misinterpreted as a theocratic one which would wipe out all other sects. When the vast majority of people are Hindus, the State is democratically Hindu. It is also

¹²⁹ Source: Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koenraad_elst. Elst wrote his PhD thesis on the Ideological Development of Hindu Revivalism and is considered by his left-wing critics as an extreme right-wing theorist. Interestingly, in theory at least, being for or against nationalism has probably nothing to do with the Left-Right distinction. What matters, most importantly, is one's stance for or against historical materialism as a normative as well as a descriptive/scientific viewpoint, but that is another story.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

a secular state and all those who are now non-Hindus have also equal rights to live here. The State does not exclude any one who lives here from occupying any position of honor in the State. It is unnecessary to call ours a Hindu state or a secular state.¹³³

At a non-philosophical or a practical level, the sectarian or the “minority” problem in India, according to Golwalkar, was a product not of religion but of Muslim and Christian proselytizing linked with political patronage. Given his distaste for the state and alleged disinterest in traditional Hindu religion, the practical, the practical solution Golwalkar offers gives us an insight into his mind.

The politician is the last man [to solve the problem]! The same could be said of the religious leaders also. At present, in our country, there are religious leaders in both communities who are extremely narrow-minded. So we want a third type of individuals who will be religious in spirit, and non-political, and will have an integrated national concept in their minds. Without the religious background, nothing can be achieved. Politicians are playing their own game by dividing the people more and more. It is they who emphasize caste, and accentuate ‘Hindu-Muslim tension’. In all such communal matters the villain of the piece is the politician. Unfortunately he has become the leader of the people whereas persons of great merit, character and devotion to God who should have been the real leaders of the people, are nowhere.¹³⁴

To sum up, Golwalkar’s view of religious nationalism resembled fascism in some respects but not completely. What is important for thesis is the fact that, unlike other sadhus, he emphasized organization building over anything else, by instilling discipline among youth. The network that he developed played a major role during Independence and continued to do even during the RJB conflict in the late 80s’s and early 90’s. Despite his self-declared distaste for the state, he is not an apolitical and ahistorical sadhu wandering in the wilderness. He is politically engaged in modern ways but he is still a sadhu. This implies changes over time in the definition of sadhus, which makes it possible to have sadhus—with ideological inheritance no doubt playing a role—as independent religious actors.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

SUMMARY OF THE FOUR SADHUS

The following matrix compares the sadhus just discussed along nationalistic, organizational, and political lines:

	<i>Different modes of worship acceptable; but Hindu culture constitutes the essence of India.. [Religion not important as such.]</i>	<i>All modes of worship true; but Hinduism is the most evolved of all religions and is the essence of India. [Religion matters.]</i>	<i>Hinduism/Vedanta is the best and the only true religion, and is the essence of India. [Religion is the only thing that matters.]</i>
<i>Organize from above</i>			Dayanand , through social and relief work among Hindus
<i>Organize from below</i>	Golwalkar , through martial discipline and propaganda techniques	Aurobindo , through revolutionary but elitist cells	
<i>No need to organize</i>		Vivekanand , through social work among Hindus and general appeal to become manly like missionaries	

Were these four sadhus all stridently pro-Hindutva—meaning the need for Indian culture, defined essentially in Hindu terms, to find political expression for India’ civilizational progress? The simple answer is No, because Hindutva has a definite political dimension that is lacking in the first three sadhus, Dayanand, Aurobindo, and Vivekanand. Their goal was inspirational, their analyses rhetorical, and their purpose altogether non-Machiavellian in that their central argument was that Hindu religion had been dealt a bad hand. Or, according to Girilal Jain, an ardent Hindu nationalist and respected editor of one of India’s foremost newspapers, *The Times of India*, Hindu nationalism—as articulated by the first three sadhus—was neither anti-Western/anti-materialistic nor anti-secular.

Instead of seeing [Western] . . . civilization in its view of its emphasis on reason, rule of law and spirit of inquiry, we have condemned the West on the ground that it was materialistic, as if material well-being was not one of the principal concerns of our forefathers.

The secularist-national position is that the Indian state embodies an ideal, and is there to serve it; that while it is a creature of the Constitution, it is above the people [the Hobbesian Leviathan concept]; that in our multireligious society, there is no other choice. In the Hindu view . . . [although] the state has to be an expression of the Hindu ethos and personality . . . [s]uch a state cannot either discriminate against any religious group or

seek to impose a uniform pattern on the inhabitants. . . but the state would see itself as an instrument for the promotion of Hindu civilization.¹³⁵

In contrast, the more practical sadhu, Golwalkar, is less interested in Indian civilization and Hindu superiority. He is far more pro-Hindutva than the others by working in the shadows, whose ideas and his organization—despite being openly martial and authoritarian—work slowly like termites that patiently chip away at a structure from within, and subvert State from below.

To sum up, the sadhus discussed above were radicals because they went against the grain and reinterpreted popular Hinduism in elitist ways. To paraphrase Mark Twain, “The radical invents the views. When he has worn them out, the conservative adopts them”.¹³⁶ Five decades of grand theorizing, starting from Dayanand, became commonsense by the time Guru Golwalkar picked up the ideas and consolidated RSS. Another five decades of elite theorizing and organizational work on his part and others followed before those too became commonsense ideas, radicalized once again by sadhus along more populist lines. A remarkable consolidation and a remarkable cyclical play of ideas.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Girilal Jain, *The Hindu Phenomenon*, New Delhi: UBS Publishers’ Distributors Ltd., 1994. pp. 12—13.

¹³⁶ John M. Shanahan (ed.), *The Most Brilliant Thoughts of All Time (In Two lines or Less)*, New York: Cliff Street Books/HarperCollins Publishers, 1999, p. 157.

¹³⁷ It is tempting to mention that the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci may have cringed how conservative commonsensical ideas could become a source for radical politics.

CHAPTER IV

THE RE-EMERGENCE AND SPLINTERING OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM: SADHUS IN THE RAMJANMABHOOMI CONFLICT AND LATER

On 23 December 1949, in the dead of night, a group of men [that is alleged to have included a sadhu I interview in the next chapter] set in motion a chain of events that were to become most contentious in independent India. On that cold night, a bag containing water from the Saryu river, idols of [the God] Ram Lalla and a copper urn moved towards the Babri Masjid from the Ram Chabutra [platform]. The two dozen odd policemen posted at the shrine paid no attention to the stealthy movements of the shadowy group, who entered the poorly guarded precincts of the shrine by scaling the boundary wall between the inner and the outer courtyard. With the light of a lantern, a few of them washed the floor of the *sanctum sanctorum* and placed the idol on a sacred piece of cloth. They reverentially covered it with another piece of cloth and lit incense sticks in front of it. . . By [the next morning] . . . all of Ayodhya was buzzing with reports about the divine appearance of the idol.”¹³⁸

It is remarkable but regretful that a seemingly innocuous incident such as this contained the seeds not only of a nationalist awakening in the late 20th century—something that the four sadhus discussed earlier had failed to achieve—but also the destruction of lives and properties on a large-scale 37 years later. A brief background:

There is a consensus among scholars on *only one* issue of the complex story that has come to be known as the Ayodhya conflict—involving the Hindu Ramjanmabhoomi (RJB) temple, claimed to be the exact birthplace of Lord Ram, and the Babri Masjid (BM)—that the mosque was built in 1528 under direct orders of the first Moghul emperor Muhammad Jalal ud-din Babur (simply, Babur). Everything else is fiercely debated to this day.¹³⁹ One would expect that the present-day

¹³⁸ P. V. Narasimha Rao, *Ayodhya 6 December 1992*, New Delhi: Viking, 2006, pp. 6—7. Narasimha Rao was India’s Prime Minister from 1991—1996.

¹³⁹ See, Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991.

Ayodhya, the earthly playground of Lord Ram as the incarnation of God Vishnu, would be accepted as the mythical Hindu city referred to in popular *ancient* epics such as the *Rama-Katha*, *Ramayana*, or the *Ramcharitmans*—not quite, the detractors assert, showing that Ayodhya as a popular place among Vaishnav sadhus emerged only in the sixteenth century.¹⁴⁰ More controversial is the idea that another city, geographically removed from present-day Ayodhya, but with a similar sounding name and of a greater antiquity was sacred to Jains and Buddhists, but not to Hindus. One might think that everyone would agree that a Ram temple had been destroyed to build a mosque—not in the least bit, according to many archaeologists whose pro-Congress sympathies were evident even before scientific investigations at the site began. The believers, however, claimed that if others can have faith in Christianity’s idea of Immaculate Conception or Islam’s Mohammed riding on the Angel Gabriel’s mythical horse from an exact spot to another exact spot, the Seventh Heaven—what was wrong in believing that Ram was born on that exact spot also? One might expect that this particular temple site was the only uncontested birthplace of Ram—not at all true, the critics argue, given differences among local sadhus over the competing birthplaces of Ram in Ayodhya itself. And one might be tempted to think that the birthplace of Ram had something to do with a local conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims—heaven forbid, but that is indeed what seems to have happened according to a tentative consensus among legal, British, and administrative scholars about the RJB-BM conflict.¹⁴¹

According to Pannikar and Rao, the genesis of the conflict can be traced to the 19th century patronage of relatively liberal Muslim Shia nawabs [semi-royalty, influenced by certain Hindu courtiers] in building Hindu temples in Ayodhya—the capital city of the Awadh, then relatively independent from direct British rule, in what is now the state of Uttar Pradesh.¹⁴² According to sources reported in Gopal and Rao, four stories converge that led certain sadhus to stake a claim over the Babri Masjid: (i) A corrupt Hindu mahant [abbot] of the Hanumangarhi temple complex [perhaps the most important religious institution in Ayodhya] was expelled from Hindu

¹⁴⁰ K. N. Pannikar, *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴¹ Both Rao and Gopal confirm this. See, P. V. Narasimha Rao, *Ayodhya 6 December 1992*, New Delhi: Viking, 2006; and Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991.

¹⁴² See, K. N. Pannikar and Sushil Srivastava, *Ibid.*

ascetic orders who, in order to take revenge, converted himself to Islam and goaded Sunni Muslim leaders—who were angry even otherwise by the temple-building and liberal policies of Shia nawabs—to capture Hanumangarhi and assert orthodox Islam¹⁴³; (ii) Under the leadership of the Sunni Muslim leader, Shah Gulam Hussain, the Sunni Muslims attacked the Hanumangarhi complex in 1855, instigated by a propaganda that a temple had been built there over the ruins of a mosque at that very spot—a precursor in reverse to the RJB conflict of the 1980s; (iii) The new mahant of Hanumangarhi, with an army of Vaishnav sadhus [bairagis] drove out the Sunni Muslims and attacked the invading Muslims who had taken shelter in the Babri Masjid; and (iv) Fearing the prospect that Muslims’ claim to build a mosque at Hanumangarhi may renew in the future or actually be accepted by the British, the Hanumangarhi sadhus filed a counter-claim that the Babri Masjid had been built over the ruins of a Ram temple. They took over part of the Babri Masjid complex to celebrate and consolidate their victory. Many Sunni Muslims killed in the battle were buried there and Hanumangarhi sadhus built a platform for Hindu worship [Ram chabutra] outside the mosque.

At that stage the British—given their perception that Muslims had betrayed them more than Hindus in India’s First War of Independence (the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny)—“erected a fence to separate the places of worship of the Hindus and the Muslims”¹⁴⁴ in 1859, and allowed Hindu worship to continue. According to sadhu discourse, “many” attempts were made to liberate the helpless locked Lord Ram.¹⁴⁵ What seems to have happened, actually, is that between 1885 and 1949—and then from 1949 till 1986—the matter remained in a legal limbo, with Hindu and Muslim representatives filing claims and counter claims over who owns the overall RJB-BM site, the specific piece of land, or the ownership title. While Hindu worship from outside the RJB-BM structure was allowed to continue all throughout, Muslim prayers (*namaaz*) were not permitted to take place after 1949.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ See, Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 220.

¹⁴⁵ Ironically, as I showed in the earlier part of this chapter, the “helplessness” of the idol of the Lord Shiv had led the sadhu Dayanand to renounce popular Hindu religion altogether. In this case, the trapped idol only strengthened sadhus’ resolve.

To summarize: it took 64 years from 1885 from a battle on the Hanumangarhi fortress to a stealthy movement in the middle of nowhere on the night of December 23, 1949 to set the ball rolling. And with the alleged temple subsequently locked, it took another 37 years before the locks to the temple were suddenly unlocked by the “enemy” itself.¹⁴⁶ This time it was not a battle over a temple replacing a mosque, but the other way around, replacing a mosque by a temple. What happened?

This chapter documents the rise and fall of Hindu nationalism, mirroring the theoretical framework outlined in the Chapter 1. First, I will document the reemergence of Hindu nationalism in the post-Independence era and describe how political parties used religion as a tool as they competed for power. Next, I will discuss nationalist politics from 1986-89, during which time religious nationalists increasingly relied on the “Friend vs. Foe” distinction in order to set themselves apart from the religious and political Other. Finally, I will describe the Ayodhya incident through the lens of politics as theater, where politicians used religion for self aggrandizement/to confer legitimacy and sadhus came to their own to claim RJB. These three accounts outline the rise of religion as a political force in India, while the subsequent section documents its demise, and Chapter V explains the rise and splintering through perspective and lens of sadhus.

Political Competition, Post-1949: The Re-Emergence of Hindu Nationalism

After India’s Independence in 1949 it was easy for Congress to project itself as the sole political soul of the nation, given that its only ideological competitor, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS/National Volunteer Organization)—seen as the inheritor of the legacies of the four Hindu giants, Dayanand, Aurobindo, Vivekanand, and Golwalkar—had lost legitimacy following the assassination of Gandhi in 1948.¹⁴⁷

Banned from indulging in open political activism, Golwalkar, the second head (*sarsanghchalak*) of RSS, decided strategically to work at the socio-psychological level from below. As indicated

¹⁴⁶ The reference here is to the self-declared enemy of religious nationalism—the Congress party—itsself locking the temple-mosque at one time and unlocking it at another period.

¹⁴⁷ Although the assassin Nathuram Godse had been associated with the RSS at one time, the immediate trigger that led to Gandhi’s assassination was Gandhi’s insistence that Pakistan, which had carved itself out as a new nation from India, ought to be compensated financially—an idea that incensed nationalists.

in Chapter III, he established a wide network of committed, disciplined, and patriotic youngsters, interconnected through cadre-based martial branches called *shakhas*. These shakhas were supervised by propagandists, called *pracharaks* who were modeled after celibate sadhus. Under pressure from pro-Hindu politicians who had served Congress reluctantly during the Independence movement, the ban on RSS was lifted. Golwalkar also gave in to Congress's condition and allowed RSS members as *individuals*—that is, after renouncing their membership in the RSS—to join an insignificant Hindu nationalist party, the Jana Sangh, founded in 1951 by Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, one of RSS's own.

Despite Jana Sangh's talk of Indian society being “self-born” as an “organic unity” with a Hindu identity—the old nationalist refrain, to which was added an emphasis on political and economic decentralization as opposed to Congress's socialist leanings—¹⁴⁸ Jana Sangh failed to strike a chord among the Indian electorate. Given the support of RSS's organizational network it co-opted minor Hindu nationalist parties (such as the Hindu Mahasabha and Ram Rajya Parishad), but the party had no concrete policy agenda of its own. It remained reactionary, scoring some points by accusing Congress of appeasement of minorities and granting of special status to Muslim-dominated state of Jammu & Kashmir (J & K).¹⁴⁹ The Jana Sangh remained inconsequential till RSS founded another affiliate the following year, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) as its “religious arm”, in keeping with the Hindu iconography of the many-armed goddess.

As indicated earlier, despite the founding objectives of VHP, the immediate reason behind the creation of the VHP was to thwart secessionist tendencies among tribals and people in the northeast (particularly Nagaland), mostly recent converts to Christianity from Hinduism. The danger of the breakup of the Sikh-dominated state of Punjab in the northwest, along religious and

¹⁴⁸ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1996, p. 124—125. The person responsible for framing Jana Sangh's new charter—which he called *Integral Humanism*—was a RSS *pracharak*, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. At a practical level, Jana Sangh's ideas resonated well among middle caste small traders and upper caste traditionalists.

¹⁴⁹ Basically—in exchange for agreeing to align itself with the Indian state as opposed to Pakistan—Kashmir, under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, had relinquished its rights to defense, foreign affairs and communications. In return, the Indian government relinquished its rights to bring Kashmir into the ambit of common laws, particularly in the area of ownership of property and domicile rights of Kashmiri citizens. Given that similar laws applied to outlying tribal areas in other Indian states, these matters were never a source of major concern during the 1970s.

linguistic lines, added urgency to the formation of VHP.¹⁵⁰ But the problem of the proselytizing Christian missionaries remained a bigger existential threat to Hindu unity and a perceived decline in Hindu population. As such, VHP continued to mimic Christian missionaries, by setting up schools, community centers, and dispensaries in order to prevent low-caste Hindus, tribals, and other underprivileged social groups from abandoning the Hindu fold for economic reasons. Since such battles were being waged in tribal and peripheral areas, away from the glare of mainstream society, VHP did not attract much attention.

It was only during the mid-1960s when VHP had just begun to raise its head, that signs from above sowed seeds that led to cracks in the hegemony of the Congress party. Monsoons failed during 1965 and 1966. Declining agriculture and currency devaluation weakened the electorate, cutting across caste and class lines. Finding dissidence from within the ranks, the leader of the Congress, the charismatic Indira Gandhi and daughter of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, broke ranks with the somewhat ossified traditional Congress and carried out several populist policies, including nationalization of banks, direct poverty reduction programs, and a highly interventionist but successful war that liberated Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. As conventional wisdom goes, a heady Indira Gandhi created a group of Congress politicians personally loyal to her and undermined colleagues who wanted to stick by organizational norms. Popularly elected state governments were dismissed and reinstated by Indira loyalists. But without the nominal checks and balances of party discipline, political corruption became more commonplace. And when droughts, food shortages, and oil price shocks hit the country in the early to mid-1970s, much of what Indira had accomplished evaporated. What stuck in people's minds were the tendencies of her son gone wild.¹⁵¹ Hindu nationalism sneaked in from the back door.

Given widespread anti-Congress sentiment and internal dissent, Indira Gandhi was challenged in court over electoral violations. An increasingly authoritarian Indira rejected the court's ruling

¹⁵⁰ The VHP argued that Sikhism and Hinduism were religions that grew from the same soil (unlike Islam and Christianity). In this way it managed to invite and co-opt the main leader of the Sikh separatist movement at its founding ceremonies in 1964.

¹⁵¹ Besides charges of corruption against her son, Sanjay Gandhi, policies initiated and implemented by him cost Indira Gandhi dearly: the first involved the destruction of a historic Muslim district and indiscriminate police firing in the heart of old Delhi; the other involved trying to forcibly enforce unpopular birth control measures.

against her and imposed a state of Emergency in 1975, ordering the arrest of dissidents of all stripes, even from within the Congress party itself. It is estimated that more than 100,000 were put behind bars without trial. Freedom of political expression and assembly were totally restricted. Given the activism of the charismatic socialist leader Jaiprakash Narayan's call for "total revolution", the Emergency was ultimately lifted in 1977; and for the first time since 1947, a non-Congress party, under the banner of the Janata Party—a hodge-podge grouping of many parties, assisted by the immense support of the organizational network of the RSS—came to power at the Center. The clumsy unity split over the "dual membership" issue—with one faction insisting that political leaders with RSS/Jana Sangh background ought not to be allowed in the new party. BJP (or ex-Jana Sangh) walked out, leaving behind two corrupt, squabbling, and short-lived governments that collapsed in three years. Indira re-emerged in 1980 by skillfully driving a wedge between two competing factions within the ruling party (the semi-nationalists and the semi-socialists), and by combining a populist anti-poverty programme with and a non-populist one that appealed upper-caste Hindus. With minor opposition parties out of the way, the historic struggle between a supposedly secular Congress and nationalist forces, reincarnated as the BJP, took a new turn. Unfortunately nationalism and sub-nationalism once again morphed in different forms to lead to the impending downfall of the Congress and the rise of religion as a political force:

In February 1981 Meenakshipuram, a village in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu with a population of 1,3000, almost all of whom were "untouchables,"¹⁵² became a center of controversy when large-scale conversions to Islam were reported. For the VHP and its associate organizations, Meenakshipuram conversions were not an outburst of local grievances, but "a small experience of old conspiracy to destroy Hindus, Hinduism, and Hindusthan," financed by petrodollars. It was reported that around 1,000 of 1,250 untouchables had converted to Islam. . .

The Meenakshipuram episode was widely publicized by the VHP . . . The VHP floated the Sanskriti Raksha Yojana (Program to Protect Culture) immediately after the incident. In November and December 1982, it launched the Jana Jagrana Abhiyana (Campaign for People's Awakening) to "warn" the Hindus about "the international conspiracy to devour Hinduism." . . . The VHP's Marg Darshak Mandal, a committee of sadhus to guide the VHP in formulating its policies and programmes, formed the Dharma Sansad, a kind of

¹⁵² Belonging to the lowest among the lowest of the four-fold Hindu caste hierarchy. "Untouchability" is a reality to reckon with, not to be wished away by justifying it through grand theorizing. In many cases most things touched by the untouchable are rejected by the upper castes on grounds of ritual purity. The most despicable practice engendered by this institution is where even the shadow cast by the untouchable is regarded as impure.

Hindu religious parliament in 1982. . . The Dharma Sansad, as a religious congregation [of sadhus], was expected to give society a “Hindu” perspective on social and political matters.¹⁵³

As Katju mentions in the passage quoted above, sadhus were “expected” to provide a “Hindu” perspective on things, a view that seemed to imply either VHP’s lack of confidence in itself or VHP’s wish that some sadhus would be persuaded by it.

Many sadhus did come on board reluctantly in 1983 when VHP (and BJP) launched a nationwide procession modeled after a Hindu pilgrimage, called Ektamata Yatra (or ‘unity in thought and belief’), to test Hindu sentiments and the extent to which that would translate into votes.¹⁵⁴

There were two immediate reasons—besides the Meenakshipuram episode—that propelled the anxieties of VHP and BJP in launching the procession, namely, the demand for autonomy in northeastern areas such as Assam, as well as secessionist problems in Punjab and Kashmir.¹⁵⁵

By appealing to national integrity and Hindu interests, Indira Gandhi seemed to be pulling the rug from under VHP’s feet. Similarly, her manipulation of the Kashmir issue and projecting herself as pro-Hindu resurrected old but defining wounds of the Hindu nationalists, and heightened the possibility that the Muslim-majority state might get partitioned or leave Hindu India altogether. As reported by Nyla Ali Khan,

At that point in India’s political history [during early 1980s], Indira Gandhi was . . . making overt and covert appeals to Hindu majoritarianism against grossly exaggerated secessionist threats from Muslim and Sikh minorities. Gandhi’s blatant mobilization of Hindu fanaticism worked wonders for the Congress in the [Hindu-dominated] Jammu region, where it won 23 of 32 assembly seats. But the performance of the Congress in the Muslim dominated Kashmir Valley was dismal, where it won just two seats. . . But Gandhi did not accept the unambiguous verdict given by the populace of Kashmir in a democratic fashion. Gandhi’s ire was particularly provoked by the alliance that the NC had formed with Indian opposition parties in an attempt to unify anti-Congress forces as a preliminary preparation for parliamentary elections in late 1984. . . . In order to quell [a]

¹⁵³ Manjari Katju, *Vishva Hindu Parishad and Hindu Politics*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, pp. 33—35.

¹⁵⁴ As reported by Manjari Katju (Ibid.), Christophe Jaffrelot (Ibid.), and many newspapers of the day, this first of several similar processions that followed—attended by a selected group of sadhus against a backdrop of quasi-religious but modern rituals and symbols—was more a curiosity for Indians than anything else.

¹⁵⁵ A very vocal group of separatist Sikhs, led by a charismatic Sikh religious preacher, Jarnail Bhindranwale, had been used by Indira Gandhi to defeat the BJP-allied Akali Dal in Punjab. Ironically, the manipulative creation of a militant Sikh identity as separate from Hindus led to a chain of events that ended in the assassination of (“the Hindu”) Indira Gandhi in 1984 and a massacre of thousands of Sikhs, exhorted by Hindu extremists as well as some Congress-aligned Hindu leaders.

tacit declaration of autonomy, Gandhi resorted to undemocratic and unconstitutional means as his government approached the end of its first year in 1984. The Congress government in New Delhi orchestrated the formation of a new political party, comprising twelve NC legislators who unconstitutionally quit their party and formed a new government with the support of the Congress legislators in the J & K assembly. . . . The dismissal of the [state] government was perceived as a blow to the morale of the Kashmir people The protests that ensued in the Valley were brutally repressed by detachments of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and Indian paramilitary forces which were flown surreptitiously from Delhi to Srinagar the night before the coup.

Salman Rushdie, in a rare display of political acumen, observes that, “The growth of Hindu fanaticism, as evidenced by the increasing strength of the RSS, the organization which was behind the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, has been very worrying; and it has had its parallel . . . in the increased support for the Muslim extremist Jamaat Party in Kashmir—the support being, itself, the result of the toppling of Farooq Abdullah by the Center, which seemed to legitimize the Jamaat’s view that Muslims have no place in present-day India.” . . . The beginning of representative government in J & K in 1977 was summarily destroyed in 1984.¹⁵⁶

The winning streak of the “secular” Congress—despite its history of courting different religious communities at different times for votes—was stopped short by Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her own Sikh bodyguards. Radicalized by the Sikh separatist movement, the Sikhs had been incensed by Indira’s orders to the Indian army to storm the sacred temple of the Sikhs in order to smoke out the separatist religious preacher, Bhindranwale, that she herself had created for electoral reasons.¹⁵⁷ Despite Indira Gandhi’s much criticized appeasement of Hindu votes, Congress won elections solely on grounds of sympathy, as the martyr and daughter of the first Prime Minister of independent India. Indira’s politically inexperienced son, Rajiv Gandhi, rode to power, inheriting from her or from tradition, the simultaneous appeasement of Muslim and Hindu communities on religious grounds. And riding on their own visibility during the highly publicized ritual of the 1983 quasi-religious procession (the Ektamata Yatra), VHP and BJP, in 1984, started making noise about liberating the Ramjanmabhoomi temple. They were helped in the process by the appeasement policies of Congress itself, as Rajiv Gandhi, fearful of a Hindu backlash, rarely came out against the building of the Ram temple. In retrospect, the only question was how and when would Hindu nationalism capture the popular imagination.

¹⁵⁶ Nyla Ali Khan, *Undemocratic Institutions within Indian Democracy*, in Kashmirwatch.com, or see http://www.kashmirwatch.com/showexclusives.php?subaction=showfull&id=1211631709&archive=&start_from=&ucat=15&var1news=value1news

¹⁵⁷ See footnote 90.

In 1985, Rajiv overturned a Supreme Court ruling that would have allowed an elderly and divorced Muslim woman to receive alimony/compensation from her ex-husband. This was the infamous Shah Bano case. Since this was the defining moment for the re-emergence of Hindu nationalism, let us dwell on the issue a bit. According to Arun Shourie:

Shah Bano had been married for forty three years. She had borne five children. Her husband, a prosperous lawyer, threw her out. The magistrate ordered the husband, with his flourishing practice, to pay her a maintenance allowance of Rs. 25 [about half US\$] a month. This the High Court raised to “princely sum” of Rs. 179 and 20 paise [or about three and a half US\$] a month. The Supreme Court confirmed it saying that the relevant section of the Criminal Procedure Code applied to all. Islam it was shouted had been put in jeopardy.¹⁵⁸

Rajiv Gandhi overturned the court judgment despite objections from religious as well as secular legal scholars. The three main objections were:

- (i) The Muslim Personal Law (“Shariat”) Application Act, enacted in 1937—meant to be an amalgam of *customary* laws relating to matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance—was itself debated by theorists belonging to different traditions in Muslim jurisprudence. But in all the different versions men were treated superior to women, violating the very first principle of law and the Fundamental Rights of the Indian Constitution.¹⁵⁹
- (ii) Islam would not be in danger if Shah Bano got her rightful alimony as determined by the Supreme Court. More generally, a concerted effort to move towards the ideal of a common civil law—as enshrined in the Indian Constitution—would not bring about the demise of any religion.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Arun Shourie, *A Secular Agenda: For Strengthening our Country, For Welding It*, New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 1993, p. 130.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134. “[T]he Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act of 1937 [passed by the British as a divide and rule policy] is just another ordinary law. It can be altered, repealed, replaced like any other law. Even under that Act as it stands, Shariat is to over-ride only customs and usage, *not* laws passed by legislators.”

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 134—136. “[I]n any event with the Constitution having come into force in 1950 . . . Article 44 of the Constitution contains an unambiguous, unqualified Directive: ‘The State *shall* endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India. . . [If such laws conflict with Article 25, the freedom to practice religion, that right to religion will not be] absolute but subject to the requirements of public order, health, morality, social and reform. . . But there is an even more general restriction to the right to freedom of religion. . . [I]t specifies that in addition the freedom to religion shall be subject to ‘the other provisions of this Part’—that is, Part III of the Constitution, the Part which prescribes our Fundamental Rights. . . [From a theoretical/legal point—hardly enforced—the relevant Fundamental Rights imply equality of men and women, non-discrimination on grounds of sex, a guarantee to life with dignity, and traffic in human beings, women or otherwise.]

- (iii) The Muslim Personal Law, applied very selectively over India's history, are not insisted upon by Muslims themselves in Western and some Middle Eastern countries. The Indian state of Goa categorically rules it out.

Under pressure from conservative and self-appointed Muslim clerics and representatives, Rajiv went against the judgment of the highest court of the land for purely electoral reasons. The criticism transcended party lines and Rajiv Gandhi came under attack from secularists and moralists also who framed the debate as one involving women's rights. The Hindu nationalists framed the discourse as one about the "pseudo-secularism" of the Congress party. The Shah Bano case got so much visibility that Rajiv Gandhi, in another significant but "quasi-illegal" move, bowed down to a few Ayodhya sadhus in order to placate Hindu sentiments in general. He overturned the 1949 court ruling relating to the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid structure.

The incident of December 23, 1949, that had "locked" Lord Ram was undone on February 1, 1986, amidst huge celebration and fanfare, especially among few local sadhus in Ayodhya. It took politics as friend *vs.* foe and politics as theatre to bring matters to a head.

From a historical point of view what happened is that post-Independence politics had started out with the secular Congress party in control, but that the Congress's hegemony quickly disintegrated (because of authoritarian excesses and populist uprisings). The religious right was quick to step into the vacuum. Except for its presence in India, the Left had hardly any presence on the national political scene. It was only after BJP started to raise its head in a big way—with sadhus on its side—that the Left rushed to form a coalition with the Congress. By the time it happened it was too late. Sadhus—whose symbolic and moral authority was far greater than the Left—had raised the dramatic element in the political theater beyond anyone's imagination. Spanning almost four decades, these developments sit well with the framework outlined in Chapter I, where the use or misuse of religion by political leaders, and the symbolic fights between friend and foe dominate politics.

Hindu Nationalist Politics, post 1986: Who is the Friend and Who is the Foe?

Despite the symbolic victory of Hindu forces and a few Ayodhya sadhus, what happened actually was that Congress became an ephemeral friend of the BJP, by allowing Hindu devotees to worship inside the disputed structure and by permitting VHP to perform ritualistic Hindu

ceremonies and prayers from outside the RJB-BM site itself. But for political reasons or “public consumption” the rivalry between such friends had to be kept alive. Not surprisingly, Congress began patronizing self-appointed Muslim leaders of newly-found Muslim organizations such as the Babri Masjid Action Committee. Thus, according to a detailed study of the Ayodhya conflict, the friend/foe distinction between Hindus and Muslims and between Congress and BJP became an artificial creation that could have been nipped in the bud.

[M]uch of the political agenda on the Ayodhya dispute was set by Muslim leaders. Meetings were organized [and] memorandums submitted. . . This led to the formation of several groups of agitating Muslim leaders, who succeeded in projecting the Babri Masjid as the symbol of Muslim pride in India. It had to be restored to the community if the Muslims were to live with dignity in the country. The VHP on its part was complacent for the first few months after the locks had been opened. Its immediate demand had been met and Hindu devotees had access to the shrine. It has been argued on several occasions that the Ayodhya dispute would not have become a recurring issue had the Muslim leadership not provided a strident tone to their agitation. . . Some of the Muslim leaders, who played a crucial role in the initial months after the unlocking of the gates, have contended that the Muslim leadership made little effort to address themselves to the majority of Hindus who at that stage did not support the VHP or its agitation. The Muslim leaders also made little effort to enlist the support of non-Muslim politicians with secular credentials. Instead, the entire dispute was projected as a Muslim versus Hindu dispute which left non-Muslim politicians with little chance to intervene. The hard stance of the Muslim leadership also aided the VHP which was quick to mount a campaign arguing that the Muslims were not sensitive to Hindu sentiments. The shriller the pitch of the Muslim leadership, the greater was the boost to the VHP. Consequently, the spread of the Hindutva idea that saw the Muslims as natural adversaries who had to be tamed into submission and Ayodhya were the main issue on which the Hindus could not relent.¹⁶¹

In order to escalate a contrived rivalry between Congress and BJP, L. K. Advani, one of the oldest but active political leaders in the country, whose moral arc seemed to transcend petty politics, was appointed president of the BJP. Instead of challenging Congress on the Ayodhya issue—over which they appeared as allies—Advani drew attention to a major arms corruption scandal in Congress, called the Bofors issue, and argued that Hindu nationalism was not an enemy of modernity and secularism as the “corrupt modernist” Rajiv Gandhi would have everyone believe. According to Mukhopadhyay:

¹⁶¹ Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*, New Delhi: Indus, 1994, p. 214—215.

[The BJP first] projected itself as the only political party that considered the temple agitation to be a legitimate one, and a right one at that, to undo the “historical wrong”.

The accusation [then] was that the “unity, integrity, security, and honour of India” was in “more danger than at any time since Independence. However, the *raison d’être* of the listing of failures of the government, was that when Rajiv Gandhi assumed office it was expected that a “dynamic modern man would smash the shackles of obscurantism and bigotry and lead the country into the 21st century; and a Mr. Clean would sweep clean the Congress (I) stables of corruption and incompetence. The chargesheet was the result of the failure of the government to live up to its initial [modernist] promise.”¹⁶²

Interestingly, it was a skillful way of showing that there was nothing obscurantist or anti-modernist in avenging the historical wrong as far as the RJB conflict was concerned. Since Congress had itself become party to correcting history by opening the locks, self-appointed Muslim leaders raised the Ayodhya issue, each trying to create an imaginary foe and upstage the other as the true representative of Muslim interests. The infighting among Muslim leaders overshadowed the historical enmity between Muslims and Hindus:

By this time a predictable tussle for power had begun within the Muslim leadership. With each wanting to outwit the other, the leaders felt that that the one giving the most belligerent call would emerge as the undisputed leader. This led to Syed Shahabuddin [a non-cleric but a well-known Foreign Service bureaucrat] giving a call to Muslims to boycott the Republic Day celebration in 1987. At the same meeting a call was given to Muslims that they should prepare themselves for a march to Ayodhya to “claim the mosque for themselves as the government was doing nothing on the matter.” There were loud pretexts . . . Advani, continuing the criticism of the Rajiv Gandhi government, argued that it was being increasingly weak-kneed and could easily be pushed into a corner, and forced submission by minority groups. He said the threatened boycott was a “case in point. The move is anti-national, it is inflammatory, irresponsible.”¹⁶³

By labeling Rajiv Gandhi’s government as weak-kneed, Advani joined the chorus of some sadhus and echoed the call of the four sadhus discussed earlier, exhorting Hindus to become more manly and assertive. But perhaps it was the short-sightedness of Muslim leadership that fed the Hindu nationalist cause the most: the boycott call was seen as evidence of Muslims putting religion over the nation. Advani shot back with a mix of religion and politics: “Who should the nation identify with; [Lord] Ram or with [the invader ruler] Babur?”¹⁶⁴ 1987 looked

¹⁶² Ibid., pp. 212—213.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 215.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 215—216.

like a long drawn out rhetorical match between Muslim and VHP/BJP leaders, dominated by display of different-colored flags, street rallies, and fiery speeches over the RJB issue. While Congress remained preoccupied with fighting corruption charges, VHP provided organizational incentives for sadhus as individuals to come aboard to join its Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas [foundation], “established with the professed goal of rebuilding the ‘magnificent temple’ after ‘shifting’ the Babri Masjid.”¹⁶⁵ The demand of one important faction within the Muslim leadership, on the other hand, was “not for the immediate restoration of the Masjid, but merely to set the judicial process in motion in order to determine the rights of the parties concerned and therefore the question of the title.”¹⁶⁶ These symbolic gestures and theoretical arguments aside, the real battle between “existential enemies” took place during the Hindu-Muslim riot in Meerut in 1987—a city with a history of communal violence. What made matters particularly disturbing this time round was the fact that members of the police force had openly taken sides with the rioting Hindu crowd.

According to some critics, the Meerut riot notwithstanding, there was no urgency to solve the Ayodhya dispute in which even non-Ayodhya sadhus were getting increasingly visible. In other words, the friend/foe distinction was again becoming problematic. For instance, given a proposal that the disputed structure be turned into a national monument owned by the Archaeological survey of India:

[The] suggestion was . . . rejected by both the Muslim leadership as well as the VHP, as both parties were keen to keep the issue unresolved. The VHP and the RSS, which had started actively monitoring the progress of the Ayodhya campaign, sensed political ascendancy if the dispute lingered on. Similarly, the Muslim leadership was contented by being accepted as the sole spokesmen for the community, and did not want to lose their pivotal position.¹⁶⁷

This served Congress well, since it could continue to focus on wiggling out of the Bofors and other corruption scandals. But once again it was the Muslim leadership, according to Mukhopadhyay, that escalated tensions by calling Muslims for “long march to Ayodhya, to

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 222.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 224.

pressurize the government into restoring the mosque to them.”¹⁶⁸ As luck would have it for the RSS:

By mid-1988, the RSS came out with a nationwide campaign to mark the birth centenary of its founder, Hedgewar, falling in 1989. Preparations started out in early 1988, and the celebrations were initiated towards the end of the year. Meetings were held at various levels in towns and cities. Among the first steps was to launch a massive project to paint graffiti on walls throughout India. There was hardly a town or city where the slogan ‘*Garv se kaho hum Hindu hain*’ (Say with pride that you are a Hindu) was not visible on the walls.¹⁶⁹

To be sure, the call about Hindu pride was popularized by a female sadhavi, Uma Bharati, who I interview in Chapter V. As I will also show there while sadhus as individuals felt impatient because activism implied long-term commitment, VHP wanted to keep the issue simmering for political reasons. A new enemy emerged, not a concrete one as such, but an abstract one called “secularism”. Led by some sadhus, the criticism was also against appeasement of religious minorities and against several Muslim countries (particularly Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) that did not practice secularism but were still feted by Western powers. According to this line of criticism, India, the argument went, should practice true secularism by implementing common set of laws for all individuals and all communities. Coming from “traditionalist sadhus” this seemingly democratic argument resonated well. If that could not be done, then sadhus, who were acting in *ad hoc* ways in their individual capacities, could be appeased as a collective force as well:

In an attempt to enlist the support of the Hindu clergy, the VHP also demanded the “annulment of the laws concerning government control of mutts [Hindu religious sanctuaries] and temples”. This demand was a noteworthy shift from the earlier approach of the RSS to liberalize Hinduism, and had been a matter of contention between the organization and the religious leaders who suffered financially, when the shrines were placed under the control of government-managed trusts. By incorporating demands made by religious leaders, the RSS was trying to draw the clergy into its campaign for the spread of the Hindutva idea. In later years also this approach of the RSS would continue. The clergy, in turn, would respond by agreeing to the RSS view of making Hindu society less rigid, and not oppose the RSS’s call to fight casteism and uplift the low castes. For the RSS and others believing in the Hindutva idea, the greatest impediment was the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 227—228.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 100.

schism within Hindu society, owing to the caste order which gave more privileges to the higher castes.¹⁷⁰

Everyone knew these were tall promises that could not be implemented overnight. What mattered most was the outcome of the upcoming 1989 elections, where the enemy to be targeted for tactical reasons was the Muslim leadership whose “basic aim . . . was to further their political career, and emerge as the undisputed leader of the Muslims . . . [where] the question of the “restoration of the Babri Masjid” was merely a convenient ladder in this rise.”¹⁷¹ On the other side, there was a parallel move: a group of sadhus wanted to become the champion of all Hindu interests, VHP or no VHP. BJP seemed to be following sadhus, not the other way around. Even the “less nationalistic leader” of the BJP, Atal Behari Vajpayee declared during the Hedgewar birth centenary rally, that “the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri masjid issue is an electoral issue . . . [and] apart from voicing his support for virtual Hindu Rashtra [state] he issued a warning to the minorities to either give away their distinct identity, or face the worst.”¹⁷² From an electoral point of view of making a clear friend/foe distinction, the most significant event in relation to the Ayodhya dispute, according to Mukhopadhyay, “took place on June 11, 1989 at a small town called Palampur, a hill resort in the state of Himachal Pradesh.”¹⁷³

In this regular meeting of the BJP executive,

the BJP made it clear that while it would work towards forging a joint anti-Congress front . . . [it would] “maintain its distinct identity” . . . In its effort to underline the BJP’s different identity from other non-Congress parties, the executive adopted a formal resolution demanding that the disputed shrine at Ayodhya must be “handed over to the Hindus” . . . [T]he JP charged the Congress and other parties with demonstrating “callous unconcern” on the “sentiments of the overwhelming majority in the country . . .” The Palampur resolution on Ayodhya contended that the “nature of controversy is such, that it just cannot be sorted out by a court of law” . . . The resolution . . . cited the instance of the [Congress] government-aided repair of the Somnath temple after Independence [which involved a conflict similar to that in Ayodhya] . . . Secularism [today], the BJP argued, could not mean a “rejection of our history and cultural heritage,” and virtually contended that till the time the Ayodhya dispute remained unresolved a to the satisfaction of the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 232—233.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 235.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 243.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 252.

Hindus, the basic issue of the nature and content of Indian nationalism would remain a contentious issue.¹⁷⁴

While the fall of the Congress can partly be explained by the relentless campaign by V. P. Singh, the leader of the Janata Dal and an expelled Congressman, to expose Rajiv Gandhi in the Bofors scandal, it could not have done so without the support of a numerically insignificant party, the BJP, whose presence grew suddenly from two seats in a parliament of 540 plus seats to 88. And BJP's rise, in turn, seemed to be the result of the association of sadhus with several dramatic and theatrical events that took place in 1989 around the Ayodhya issue.

Enter Dramatic Dragons: Intellectual Debates and Street Theatre

The spectacle of Ayodhya unfolded against a backdrop of fierce debate between secular scholars and politicians on one side, and sadhus and BJP/VHP leaders on the other. That debate was triggered by the decision of a “secular” Congress, in 1986, to grant Hindu devotees unrestricted access to the shrine. The relevant court that then banned any new construction at the RJB-BM site had to decide basically on two issues: whether the Babri Masjid had been built in 1528 over the ruins of a temple and if a temple in the honor of Lord Ram existed at that very spot. The secular elites' position is captured well in *The Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Ramjanmabhoomi Issue*.¹⁷⁵ Essentially a discourse that exalts history, science, and expert-knowledge, the main points in the book can be summarized thus:

- (i) The archaeology of present day Ayodhya does not correspond in the least bit with the description of Ayodhya in the Hindu religious epic *Ramayana*, according to which Ram was born in this thriving urban center around 3000 B.C. From a historical point of view the center of commercial and religious life around the fifth and sixth centuries—particularly for the Buddhists—was centered in this region on the town of Saket, renamed Ayodhya by the Hindu king Vikramaditya. Vikramaditya, according to this view, had shifted his kingdom there in order to link himself with the prestigious genealogy of Suryavanshi kings [race of the Sun god] whose ideal is Lord Ram born in Ayodhya of the Hindu mythology. The much smaller town of Ayodhya, perhaps a piece of literary imagination or a small town if there ever was, either faded away or went into wilderness. In a nutshell, Ram, even if he “existed” was not born on the present site in Ayodhya.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 253—254.

¹⁷⁵ See, Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991.

- (ii) Given that the Babri Masjid was built in 1528 one would have found reference to it in the most popular 16th century re-interpretation of the religious epic *Ramayana*. Written by the Ram-devotee and the north Indian poet Tulsidas, the *Ramcharitmanas* covers many phases of Ram’s life, including his childhood (*Balkaand*); and yet, critics argue, there is no reference to the building on the Babri Masjid over Ramjanmabhoomi temple.
- (iii) The fact there are many local and regional variations of the Ram story—with Ram appearing even as villain at times—it is unjustifiable to insist on only one story line, on only one version of Ram, and on only one place (Ayodhya in the *Ramcharitmanas* version) to suit contemporary politics.

The angry response of the sadhus and BJP/VHP leaders, which is examined in more detail in Chapter V, was that:

- (i) The issue of birth of Ram at the exact spot of the Ramjanmabhoomi temple was a matter of popular faith that could not be decided by science, history, or law. Echoing the sentiment of many Hindus, including sadhus, the head of RSS, Balasaheb Deoras, thundered: “This is not a case on which the judiciary can pass judgment. What type of evidence are the Hindus expected to produce? That Rama was born and that his birthplace is Ayodhya?”¹⁷⁶ In many statements made off-the-record it was argued passionately that every religion (and not just Hinduism) was built on issues of faith and had its share of beliefs in magical and supernatural phenomena that were accepted, not challenged in the court of law and reason.
- (ii) The fact that Tulsidas did not mention the demolition of Ram temple and the building of the Babri Masjid by Babur was precisely because of that—of the fear of being prosecuted for exposing the Muslim emperor’s more than serious crime. Besides, the supporters argue, Tulsidas was involved in producing a work not of history, but of poetry and literature, of religion and spirituality.
- (iii) Despite the many versions of the Ram story—all true and valid—the *Ramcharitmanas* version where Ram and Ayodhya are glorified is the most famous and most revered, nationally as well as internationally, as a religious text as well as a source for artistic productions. It is no surprise, the believers argue, that normal life came to a standstill when the 1980s TV serial *Ramayana* was aired: not only was it watched *throughout* India, it was approached by many as if were viewing divine images. There have been anecdotal reports in books and newspapers about pious Hindu viewers taking a bath before watching the show and getting visibly upset if others interrupted. Moreover, the fact that Ayodhya (besides Benaras and to some extent Haridwar in north India) continues to remain one of the main pilgrimage centers attended by Hindu devotees from all over India, strengthens the argument that although other versions of Ram legend are valid, the one based on Ram in Ayodhya has a distinctive status.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

These claims and counter-claims did not resonate much for the common person.¹⁷⁷ It was sadhu street theatre, delivered with a heavy dose of symbolism and newly-invented religious rituals, that brought this conflict out into the open.

Unveiled in February 1989 in the annual *Kumbh Mela* [an important religious fair] of sadhus, the plan, made public,

[I]ncluded the decision to lay the foundation of the new temple at Ayodhya on November 9, 1989 on the occasion of the annual festival of devuthan ekadashi (a religious festival when the gods are supposed to have risen) in Ayodhya. . . . [[T]o mobilize support for the foundation-laying ceremony, named shilanyas, another program would be launched from September 1989. In this programme, called shila puja, specially prepared bricks with Shri Ram written on them, would be consecrated in several thousand cities and villages following which they would be transported to Ayodhya. There were few to anticipate the lightning impact of the programme.¹⁷⁸

The shila puja [foundation worship] programme began on a cautious note on September 30 [1989] . . . in [about] . . . five and a half lakh [550,000] villages and localities in India. Another specially arranged ritual, Shri Ram Mahayagna, was also performed in 6,000 regional centres. . . . In the initial phases of the shila programme, people turned out primarily out of curiosity because such a religious ritual had never been witnessed by them. Ordinary bricks were being venerated, they were wrapped in the symbolic red silk scarves and vermilion marks were put on them. Offerings were made in front of the bricks and for the lakhs of devotees, who assembled in the temples where the rituals were being conducted, the bricks symbolized the temple at Ayodhya. This was true of even people who had never been to the temple-town; they were however helped in their visualization by the hordes of VHP activists who were present to ensure smooth completion of the consecration ritual.¹⁷⁹

The young activists, wearing saffron bandannas, made their way to Ayodhya with the brick shouting aggressive religious but also anti-Muslim slogans on the way. On reaching Ayodhya, the prominent sadhus with the VHP took over. Sadhu's fiery speeches stoked passions. Then, on a piece of land outside the purview of the disputed land, the foundation-laying worship ceremony was performed by some sadhus accompanied by religious songs and chants. As if to

¹⁷⁷ There were many other minor technical issues that did not excite the average person. Among those: The so-called Babri-Masjid did not have elements like minarets and therefore was not a mosque; The presence of a mosque in the middle of a graveyard, sharing a place with a structure belonging to another religion, implied that the mosque was not a mosque to begin with; and so on.

¹⁷⁸ Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*, New Delhi: Indus, 1994, pp. 242—243.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

symbolize a (non-existent) unity among Hindus, a low-caste person was chosen to place the first brick in the small foundation pit. The friendly theatre turned more ominous:

[T]he small pit was dug up and as the land was a part of the graveyard where the Muslims killed in the clash of 1855 were buried, several pieces of bones surfaced during the digging. Watched by a several-thousand-strong cheering crowd, the frenzied VHP activists did an impromptu dance waving the bones in the air. . . . [They] later declared that they would take the bones away to be kept and shown as evidence for having “started the process of undoing the historical wrongs by the Islamic invaders”.¹⁸⁰

Sadhus attempted to march towards the Babri Masjid as a way to herald the construction of the Ram temple and keep the enthusiasm of the crowds (and Hindu voters) alive. In any case, by the time these two dramatic events were over, sadhus—not just those initially associated with VHP in 1983—but a much bigger group had come to dominate the political discourse. Congress was out, and BJP became the biggest partner of the coalition government ruled by Janata Dal. It was a historic task that had been accomplished where had sadhus played a central role. But sadhus did not speak in one voice over many issues, and VHP sensed that:

Hindus had been greatly united by the Ayodhya agitation, and the twin programmes of shila puja and shilanyas. “It is our sacred duty to maintain the unity achieved” . . . The fear of schism surfacing among the Hindus was on two counts: *religious leaders with conflicting interests clashing with each other* [emphasis mine], and the inherent problems posed by the rigid caste order. Thus the VHP appealed to the religious that “forgetting all their internal differences they should unite to make the Ayodhya agitation a success.”¹⁸¹

To keep the momentum alive sadhus and activists performed another quasi-religious ceremony near the disputed site (kar seva or volunteer service) in February 1990. But there were differences among sadhus over who should assume leadership role of what and over what needed to be done next. The relatively complacent group was proud simply with the idea that Hindus had shattered the myth of being too weak and “unduly” tolerant at all times by expressing their anger and asserting manliness, just as the four historic sadhus discussed earlier had preached. Another group of sadhus was keen to move quickly with building a grand new Ram temple. And one could hear faint murmur of some individual sadhus urging others to wait for much more had to be accomplished first. Contingent developments helped the third group.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 263.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 278.

In 1990, as indicated earlier, the Janata Dal government under V. P. Singh sought to implement the populist Mandal Commission report that promised massive quotas for lower-caste Hindus in jobs and education—an anathema for both the Congress and the BJP.¹⁸² Middle and upper-caste Hindus—the traditional supporters of Hindu nationalism, RSS, and the Congress—took to the streets and massive riots followed in 1990. Perennial foes, the Congress and the BJP, became short-time friends again in order to bring down the Janata Dal. Janata Dal's was in an unstable situation, also because BJP was ruling some states independently of Janata Dal. Around the same time, L. K. Advani started on another of his symbolically elaborate rath yatras (chariot processions). Modeled again after a religious pilgrimage it started from the Somnath temple, the site of an earlier temple-mosque conflict, to Ayodhya. The drama of the procession exceeded earlier ones. The mix of traditionalist sadhus and modern media technology against a backdrop of Advani with a bow and an arrow, straight out of the Ramayana mythology, constituted an awesome image. Recalling Eric Hobsbawm:

[M]ost important and most pervasive [in this form of politics] is symbolism . . . [uniting] form and content. . . [A]n entire universe of symbolism and allegory may exist, each piece corresponding to, and indeed 'being' a specific piece, small or large, of the entire ideology and movement.¹⁸³

Partly to keep the excitement of the two sadhu-generated events alive, and partly to prevent attempts by the ruling government to divide important Hindu religious leaders, Advani's rath yatra took on a new significance. As Mukhopadhyay reports:

Advani's Rath Yatra thus appealed at two levels: As a pilgrimage undertaken by a person, and as an offensive against the government to give a rightful place to a revered god of the Hindu pantheon.¹⁸⁴

The drama was heightened when Mulayam Singh Yadav, the chief minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh where Ayodhya was located—and who had laboriously cultivated the Muslim vote bank—announced that, let alone Advani and his entourage, he would “not even allow a bird to

¹⁸² Differences in counting methodologies aside, about 50% of the Hindu population belongs to the lower castes, called Scheduled Castes and Tribes and Other Backward Castes.

¹⁸³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, New York: The Norton Library, 1965, pp. 151—152.

¹⁸⁴ Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*, New Delhi: Indus, 1994, p. 287. It has also been claimed that the rath yatra, along with the brick-laying quasi-religious events, were meant to draw Hindus from all castes as a strategy to dislodge V. P. Singh and splinter his caste-based politics.

flutter” in Ayodhya on October 30.¹⁸⁵ But before he could reach Ayodhya, Advani was arrested by a Janata leader, Laloo Yadav, in the adjoining state of Bihar.¹⁸⁶ The activist sadhus and the activist VHP rank-and-file were not to be deterred. Anticipating future events, it truly was an unanticipated twist in the unfolding drama when, on October 30, another quasi-religious ritual was performed by some sadhus and activists near the disputed site. According to Rao, the future Prime Minister:

Some devotees climb the domes of RJB-BM, damage them and hoist saffron flags. Some damage also done to compound walls of RJB-BM. The situation is brought under control quickly by the Central and State Governments, led by V. P. Singh and Mulayam Singh Yadav respectively.¹⁸⁷

According to various newspapers of those days the news of the hoisting of the saffron flag over the domes spread like wildfire, and sadhus and defiant activists were featured for days to come. In the following two months, another “use of force at Ayodhya leads to death of some people . . . riots in many parts of the country follow . . . [and there is an] attempt to blow up shrine.”¹⁸⁸ To be sure, there were schisms between VHP and the sadhus. As Mukhopadhyay explains:

A number of religious leaders most notably Swami Vamdev [interviewed in next chapter] felt that the decision to try marching again to the Babri Masjid on November 2 was wrong as it “unnecessarily exposed the unarmed kar sevaks [volunteers] to bullets”. The decision was taken at the behest of Ashok Singhal [VHP leader] who contended that a few lives lost would only help the agitation. He wanted the assembled activists to make another attempt to storm the Babri masjid, but was opposed at a meeting of senior VHP leaders camping at Ayodhya. . . Swami Vamdev . . . also articulated the skepticism of the majority of religious leaders regarding the sincerity of the BJP in building the temple . . .¹⁸⁹

However, given its growing visibility, BJP withdrew its support to the Janata Dal and V. P. Singh’s government collapsed.¹⁹⁰ Under normal circumstances the arrested or martyred Advani

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 292.

¹⁸⁶ It was also an attempt by Laloo Yadav to portray Advani as an upper-caste Brahmanical Hindu and himself as the messiah of the lower castes (and Muslims).

¹⁸⁷ P. V. Narasimha Rao, *Ayodhya 6 December 1992*, New Delhi: Viking, 2006, introductory un-numbered page.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*, New Delhi: Indus, 1994, pp. 302—303.

¹⁹⁰ It was followed by the Samajwadi Janata Party led by the socialist Chandra Shekhar, supported on the outside by the Congress Party. Accused of “spying” on its leader Rajiv Gandhi, the Congress withdrew support and Chandra Shekhar resigned, bringing an end to this extremely short-lived government.

would have won the next elections. But what brought Congress to power instead was a totally exogenous event, ironically with a distinct religious flavor: Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in 1991 in reaction to his attempt to intervene in a dispute in Sri Lanka politics involving Buddhists and Hindus. As it was in his mother's case, sympathy towards his assassination sidelined BJP.

Following Rajiv's assassination, a coalition government led by Congress came to be headed by an old Indira Gandhi loyalist and friend, P. V. Narasimha Rao. He personified a different theatrical character—one whose defining characteristics were indecision, pouting, and reticence. Thus, despite his major achievements in ushering market-oriented economic reforms—a policy that the “nationalistic” BJP had also always favored—Rao is remembered best as a Prime Minister who gave tacit support—through his indecisiveness and silence—to the destruction of the Babri Masjid, by taking for granted the BJP's assurance that it would protect the disputed site and . To paraphrase one of the sadhus interviewed in the next chapter, “Rao was after all a devout Hindu who worshipped a lot”. The dramatic characters, symbols, and events leading up to the destruction of the mosque can now be summarized.

As far as particular characters are concerned two stand out, both women, both sadhavis [sanyasins/women renouncers], both interviewed in the next chapter. Uma Bharati and Sadhavi Rithambara were regarded widely not just as rabble rousers with a remarkable command over rhetoric and religious oratory, but also as women who were desirable because they were unattainable. Mukhopadhyay describes the case of Uma Bharati in the following way:

Spotted by Vijaya Raje Scindia [ex-royalty and a leading BJP leader] during one such occasion [when Uma Bharati gave religious discourses], Uma Bharati was enrolled in the BJP, and given a party nomination in 1989 and won the seat for the party. Soon her charisma spread outside the constituency as the media profiled her on numerous occasions and she soon came to be referred as the ‘*sexy sanyasin*.’ What got her the epithet was neither her extraordinary looks or her lifestyle, but the fact that she with her saffron robes evoked the image of the ‘unattainable woman’ and thereby generated a strong sexual image.¹⁹¹

While Rithambara's cassettes, played all throughout India in buses and public places, spewed venom and anger against Muslims (and to some extent, against the Congress and the unmanly Hindus), Uma Bharati's fiery political speeches—with a heavy sprinkling of carefully selected

¹⁹¹ Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*, New Delhi: Indus, 1994, p. 304.

religious imagery—were delivered on relatively more formal forums. More importantly, according to Mukhopadhyay, her ambiguous sexuality was far more significant, particularly among the unemployed youth who had become enamored by her “heroic feat” during the build-up towards 1992:

When Uma Bharati was heading for Ayodhya, she was arrested by the Uttar Pradesh police the moment she entered the state. Detained at a government guest house, she nonetheless staged a miraculous escape and surfaced in Ayodhya a day later sans hair. She disclosed to the assembled journalists that after her escape from the place of her detention, she shaved off her head in an attempt to disguise herself and hitched lifts, including rides in police vehicles, to reach the temple-town. . . . Another BJP Member of Parliament . . . who had also sneaked past the police cordon into Ayodhya, was awe-struck on seeing Uma Bharati. His comment: “Umaji has sacrificed the near ultimate of femininity for the cause of the temple”.¹⁹²

As far as characters in the political theatre were concerned, these two women sadhus/sadhavis were considered at the time to be the “first real mass leaders in the entire RSS clan.”¹⁹³

And as far as props were concerned, the following may provide a good example of religious symbols that had become commonplace with the sadhu-led rituals in Ayodhya.

[L]ocketts, and bracelets [with Hindu symbols] found their way to the market and traders did good business peddling these wares. For women, special *bindis* [a decorative mark on the forehead] were manufactured with the sketch of the proposed temple printed on it. The success of these new symbols can be gauged from the fact that in 1991 elections, the BJP also produced and distributed similar material. Among women, there was a special demand for the *bindis* with the ‘lotus’ the election symbol of the BJP printed on it. The use of new icons has since been perfected . . . and they were again used to great benefit during the demolition of the Babri masjid when the loud speakers exhorted the assembled kar sevaks [volunteers] to “erase the symbol of shame”.¹⁹⁴

With characters and props such as the ones mentioned above, let us go back to the chronological sequence of the unfolding drama.

With Advani sidelined, temporarily after his arrest in 1991, another mass leader of the BJP, the sadhavi Uma Bharati, became mired in a sexual scandal involving a “celibate” RSS leader.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 307.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 309.

Partly to deflect these unexpected twists, BJP/VHP tried to transcend such petty issues by taking up broader causes such as poverty-alleviation (Ram and *Roti*, or bread) and secessionist movements in Kashmir and elsewhere. Other dramatic events were planned that involved the VHP leader Murli Manohar Joshi marching to Kashmir [the Ekta Yatra, or the unity procession], with all the usual religious symbolism, to hoist the Indian flag—which he couldn’t as planned because of the fear of attacks from Islamic militants. But Hindu religious leaders [sadhus] were on the upswing and held a massive public rally in New Delhi to demand the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Sensing their independence, it was at this stage that BJP provided tickets to several sadhus to fight elections on its behalf [most of whom are interviewed in the next chapter]. With a handful of sadhus entering the electoral arena, one may have expected the Ayodhya drama to become like politics as usual, but further developments took place:

Even as the BJP was drawing up plans for the Ekta Yatra, the state government of Uttar Pradesh and the VHP made quiet moves to construct the temple. The VHP, by use of appeasements and threats managed to acquire a sizable number of plots and buildings adjoining the Babri Masjid from the earlier owners. After the VHP took control of these properties, the state government acquired 2.77 acres of land in front of the disputed shrine in the first week of October 1991 ostensibly to “promote tourism and provide amenities to pilgrims”. However, the real intent was to transfer the acquired land to the [sadhu-led] VHP Trust to start constructing the temple even while the legal dispute over the shrine continued. However, it was a clever ploy to serve the twin purposes of appeasing the section of the BJP supporters who were getting restive because of inactivity on the temple front, and also to present the nation with a *fait accompli* as once a portion of the temple was built the programme could no longer be stopped.

The Court’s ruling upset the plans of the BJP and the VHP, but the state government nevertheless started demolishing the buildings on the acquired land. While there was a howl of protests at the demolitions, the state government contended that the court had barred construction but had been silent regarding demolitions. In a matter of weeks, the entire area in front of the Babri Masjid which once was a graveyard had been leveled.¹⁹⁵

When sadhus met in May 1992 at the annual Kumbh Mela in Ujjain, they declared that kar seva [voluntary service] or preparatory work for the construction of the Ram temple would be resumed on July 9. The Prime Minister Rao neither said yes nor no but gave an implicit go-

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 336—337.

ahead to sadhus, saying “*dharmic* (religious) matters should be resolved in *dharmic* ways”.¹⁹⁶

With the blessing of some sadhus,

Some construction work started on the portion of acquired land in front of the Babri Masjid that had been earlier leveled by the state government. The VHP activists started building a three-tiered platform and contended that the platform though made with concrete, was not a permanent structure. . . . The [BJP] state government provided all possible help to the VHP and for more than a fortnight, nights merged into day in the temple-town as thousands of kar sevaks [volunteers] would lie huddled together in the massive tents that were erected in the acquired land. Concrete mixers continued to churn throughout and the platform steadily started rising in height. Loud speakers blared devotional songs rendered to the tune of various popular Hindi film songs.¹⁹⁷

The lull that followed was exacerbated by Rao’s silence or lack of urgency over the Ayodhya issue was partly a result of his preoccupation with his economic liberalization programmes. In order to keep the momentum of the nationalist drama alive, however, it was announced that sadhus would meet in New Delhi on October 30 to decide on when to again resume preparatory construction work for the Ram temple. Following a series of court and government notifications, the Rao government turned over a chunk of land—after keeping to itself the disputed structure and an immediate portion of land around it—to the sadhu-led Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas [foundation] for a park to be built on the Ram theme [the Ram Katha Park]. Despite objections from Muslim clerics and representatives, extensive digging and leveling operations took place. With prohibition on new construction remaining in place, the court was again asked to adjudicate over matters of faith and archaeological evidence (whether a temple existed prior to 1528 or not). In keeping with Rao’s style of indecisive functioning the representatives of Hindu and Muslim interests continued to exchange claims and counter claims about faith *versus* archaeological evidence and about the old debate over ownership of the title to the disputed land and the disputed structure. Given Rao’s silence, tacit support, or indecision, BJP and the sadhus announced another quasi-religious ritual (*kar seva*) to take place on December 6, 1992. Emboldened by Rao’s decision that only “symbolic” rituals would be allowed, the BJP declared that it would use the 2.04 acres that it had to do some symbolic construction work and singing of *bhajans* and *kirtans* [religious devotional songs]. At the same time, Advani declared that *kar seva* would be performed with bricks and shovels and not merely by singing devotional songs.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 339.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 339—340.

In preparation for the final drama on December 6, 1992, two more theatrical chariot processions were planned, Advani's third and Joshi's second, starting, respectively, from the town of Mathura (site of another temple-mosque dispute) and the city of Benaras (site of yet another temple-mosque dispute). By the time the processions, the sadhus, the activists, the spectators, and the police converged on the morning of December 6, the temple-town was bursting at its seams. The speeches of sadhus and BJP/VHP leaders, the victory slogans of activists, and devotional songs continued to lead to the finale. According to Prime Minister Rao's detailed report:

Initial reports from Ayodhya in the beginning of the day on 6 December indicated an air of normalcy. About 70,000 persons had assembled in the Ram Katha Kunj [park] for a public meeting with some 500 sadhus and sants [another term for sadhus] gathered on the foundation terrace for performing pooja [worship rituals]. Everything seemed to be going according to the plan announced by the organizers for doing a symbolic *kar seva* and observing other formalities of *kar seva* not involving violation of the Court orders. As the crowd was being addressed . . . roughly 150 persons in a sudden move broke through the cordon and started pelting stones at the police personnel. All this happened a few minutes before noon and within a very little time, around a thousand persons broke into the RJB-BM structure. Around 12.20 p.m. about eighty persons had managed to climb onto the RJB-BM structure and started damaging the domes. At this time, the crowd inside the complex was around 25,000 with large numbers milling around. By 2.40 p.m. the crowd had increased to about 75,000.

The UP police moved away as the *kar sevaks* scaled barricades and clambered on to the domes of the mosque where saffron flags were hoisted. Then began a frenzied demolition with shovels, iron rods and pickaxes.

While this was going on, the local authorities and the police appeared to be standing as mute spectators. This dismal picture of inaction and dereliction of duty was because of orders from the Chief Minister of UP not to use force.

By 4.30 p.m., the entire structure was demolished. Idols [of Ram] which were taken out during the demolition process were placed back where the central dome of the erstwhile disputed structure stood at 6.45 p.m. Lakhs of *kar sevaks* continued to mob the entire area and the entire city of Ayodhya. By 7.30 p.m., they started work on the construction of a temporary structure for the idols.¹⁹⁸

The reactions that followed were typical. One group claimed that destruction was a divine act engendered by the presence of holy sadhus, because a small number of people with their bare hands—even with some shovels, iron rods, and pickaxes—were incapable of bringing down such

¹⁹⁸ P. V. Narasimha Rao, *Ayodhya 6 December 1992*, New Delhi: Viking, 2006, pp. 153—156.

a solid structure in less than four hours. Or, according to another view, the demolition was the result of inspired spontaneity. Another group blamed the inaction of Congress (the Prime Minister Rao) as well as of BJP (Chief Minister of the state of UP), or the pre-planned action by activists belonging to Hindu chauvinistic organizations such as Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal.¹⁹⁹ More specific accusations were made against particular VHP leaders and sadhus, claimed to have exhorted attackers to tear the mosque down. It was claimed that the most potent cheerleading slogan came from some sadhus—probably Uma Bharati—in the form of: “*Ek dhhakka aur do, Babri Masjid tod do*” or “Give it one more blow, break the Babri masjid down”.

What is interesting about this drama is that to this day people do not know (or care to know) the identity of the specific individuals who actually climbed the domes and struck the stones of the 464 year old structure. What we do know—if we go by images splashed for days after the demolition—is that sadhus were somehow involved.

Today, BJP exists as one of the two major political parties in contemporary Indian politics. VHP and RSS also exist. But religion as a political force seems to have died after the destruction of the Babri mosque. And sadhus, who had been connected with almost every aspect of practical politics and ritual theater leading up to the demolition, appeared to have renounced a cause that had united them earlier. What happened? Before we get into the interviews and the empirical data in the next chapter, I will explore certain competing explanations through a chronology of events after 1992.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ While Shiv Sena [the army of Lord Shiv] has a distinct anti-Muslim agenda, it emerged in 1966 as a “sons of the soil” party opposed to migrants in the state of Maharashtra. Bajrang Dal [a group loyal to the monkey god Hanuman] is an extension of VHP constituted by bands of committed and militant Hindu youth.

²⁰⁰ Since my second set of interviews was conducted in 2008, I will quickly summarize relevant developments after the historic day in December 1992. Although the BJP government in the state of UP was sacked—along with other BJP ruled states—for failing to protect the Babri Masjid, Rao himself lost all credibility in 1996 after a series of corruption scandals. BJP captured power at the center for the first time in 1996, then in 1998, and in 1999 till 2004.

According to Rao:

[In 2002] BJP withdraws its commitment to build a Ram temple at Ayodhya. VHP sets deadline of 15 March to begin construction of temple. *Kar sevaks* [religiously motivated volunteers] from across the country converge on Ayodhya. Compartment of the [train] Sabarmati Express carrying *kar sevaks* burns down in Godhra, Gujarat, killing a number of people. Thousands die in communal riots in Gujarat following the incident. Meanwhile, three High Court judges begin hearings to determine who owns the disputed [RJB-BM] site. . . . [In 2003] Archaeological survey of India begins a court-ordered survey to find out whether a temple to Ram existed on the disputed site. The survey says that there is evidence of a temple beneath the mosque; Muslims dispute the findings. A court rules that seven Hindu leaders should

Tying together the story lines from Chapter II and III up to this stage, it seems that sadhus are traditionally apolitical but as sadhuism evolved with the four sadhus (discussed in Chapter III), they become political actors in their own right. We see sadhus playing an increasingly important role as religious nationalism starts to become a strong political force, from a minor event in 1949 in Ayodhya to its nationwide repercussions in 1986. While all the three religion-politics models outlined in Chapter I—use or misuse of religion in competitive politics, religion as a marker for political friends and foes, and role of religion in political theater—make sense up through events leading to the destruction of the mosque, none of them adequately accounts for the demise of religious nationalism and the sudden splintering of sadhu unity. Therefore, although I summarize the splintering of religious nationalism as represented in the secondary literature, I examine the issue empirically by looking at the religious actors themselves as independent variables, as discussed in the next chapter.

The Splintering of Religion as a Political Force: The Post-Demolition Chronology

As we saw in the earlier section, religion as a political force—centered around the Ayodhya conflict—brought in focus three major actors: the VHP (and its affiliates, the BJP and RSS), the Congress party, and the sadhus. Although BJP emerged on the political scene for the first time in 1989, and actually held power periodically between 1991 and 1999 in the center and several states in 1996, the euphoria over religious nationalism and the Ram temple subsided, even during BJP's non-interrupted rule at the center between 1999 and 2004.

Immediately after the mosque demolition Congress set up the Liberhan Commission on December 16, 1992 to investigate who were responsible for the affair. To this date (2008) no definitive indictments have been made and no major figure, sadhu, a political leader, or an zealous activist, has been put behind bars. In retrospect, it appears as if Congress did not feel the urgency to thwart the rise of religious nationalism and alienate thereby Hindu votes. Not

stand trial for inciting the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992. . . [In 2004] Congress government comes to power at the Center after six years of BJP rule. Leader of the Opposition L. K. Advani says his party has an unwavering commitment to building a Ram temple at Ayodhya.

P. V. Narasimha Rao, *Ayodhya 6 December 1992*, New Delhi: Viking/Penguin, unmarked introductory pages under "Chronology of Major Events Related to Ayodhya".

surprisingly it only managed to uphold or impose a temporary ban for two years on the communal Hindu and Muslim organizations, such as the RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal, Jamaat-i-Islami, and Islamic Sevak Sangh. And although it dissolved BJP-run state governments in certain states, the Congress did not sack governments in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat where communal violence between Muslims and Hindus had taken the most lives. In short, it appeared that Congress, by virtue of its soft-stance towards religious nationalism, was increasingly becoming a non-causal factor in the demise of religion as a political force.

For legalistic purposes, however, Congress continued to ask the Supreme Court to decide whether a Hindu temple or any Hindu religious structure had existed at the Ayodhya site before to the construction of the Babri mosque. More significantly, the Congress passed an Act that sought to preserve the status quo of the disputed site as on January 6, 1993 rather than on the day before the mosque was demolished. And finally, by permitting Hindu devotees to pray at the makeshift temple erected after the demolition, Congress indirectly legitimized the forces of religious nationalism. Not surprisingly, a huge chunk of land was awarded to sadhu-led VHP trust around the disputed site. Emboldened, the senior-most BJP leader, A. B. Vajpayee, challenged any court intervention in the Ayodhya conflict because Ram temple was a matter of faith.²⁰¹ Perhaps in response, and about eight months after the demolition, Congress stated that it would take up the construction of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya on its own—led by a group of sadhus [the Shankaracharyas] under a newly created *Ayodhya Sri Ram Janmabhoomi Pratishthan* [Trust], as opposed to sadhus with the VHP's Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas [Trust]. There was no mention about the reconstruction of the mosque. In short, both Congress and the BJP continued to fan the flames Hindu religious nationalism.

Given that both Congress and BJP appeared to be on the same side of Hindu nationalism, VHP tried to differentiate itself by insisting that the Ram temple had to be constructed on the exact spot of the makeshift temple, whereas Congress-allied sadhus [the Shankaracharyas] could build their own temple elsewhere near the Ayodhya site. The competition between sadhus intensified when a VHP-aligned sadhu, Acharya Dharmendra (interviewed in the next chapter) went on a

²⁰¹ See, S. P. Udayakumar, *The Ramjanmabhumi Drama: The Post-Demolition Scene*, <http://www.sacw.net/DC/CommunalismCollection/ArticlesArchive/spuk13112004.htm>; www.sacw.net; November 12, 2004.

21-day fast in August 1994 to “emphasize the ‘sacrosanct nature’ of the site of Ram's birthplace for temple construction.”²⁰² On the other hand, under pressure from sadhus aligned to the Congress, the Congress-led central government continued with its plans to hand over to them much of land acquired around the disputed site for building the Ram temple.

Even at the state government level there did not appear to be much resistance against Hindutva forces. After a short-lived government of parties opposed to the Ayodhya movement (the Samajwadi and the Bahujan Samaj Party), BJP came back to power in 1997 in the state of Uttar Pradesh where Ayodhya is located. Its chief minister, Kalyan Singh, did all he could to stoke the flames of religious nationalism, but it was becoming increasingly clear that there was little response from people or religious leaders compared to what the country had witnessed in the early 1990s. The signs of an impending splintering of religious nationalism appeared to be emerging.

Sensing that religion as a political force was losing its appeal, Advani thundered on July 3, 1997 at Ayodhya—as if anyone was opposing him—that the “BJP would not be content till a temple was built there.” Seeking to galvanize people into action, Advani claimed on September 20, 1997: Sri Ram Lalla is actually in prison. The sooner he is released the better.”²⁰³ The BJP Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh also continued to make an issue that was a non-issue by stating that, “I have made it clear that the construction [of the Ram temple] can be completed only when the BJP comes to power at the Centre.” The speech functioned more as political theatre or cynical leveraging.

In order to revive a movement that had once captured the imagination of the country, VHP started a desperate attempt to carve stone pillars and other pre-fabricated construction activities for the future Ram temple. When reminded of Supreme Court’s order to maintain the status quo at the disputed site, VHP claimed that sadhus were above and beyond all constitutional norms, stating that “[t]he Constitution does not have any provision to punish the judiciary but religious leaders have. Any delay in the construction of the temple could break the patience of the sadhus

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

who “can then take any decision.”²⁰⁴ This was VHP’s first admission that sadhus should call the shots.

What was happening however was that sadhus had started distancing themselves from discussions among institutional actors over how to settle the Ayodhya dispute. The three options underlying the long-drawn out maneuverings implied long-term involvement on the part of sadhus and did not seem to interest them much. These were: (i) some form of negotiated settlement between Hindu and Muslim representatives, an unlikely possibility given that there were several sadhu representatives and competing Hindu and Muslim leaders; (ii) a legislation to allow the construction of the temple, another rough road given the presence of many small parties in the parliament; and (iii) a judicial approach, a hopeless prospect given the time the courts had taken to prove how difficult it was to adjudicate in matters of faith vs. archaeology and history. Even as the sadhus seemed to be distancing themselves and the public getting increasingly disinterested, the pros and cons of the three approaches kept being debated and the symbolic act of stonecutting and pillar work for the Ram temple continued.

In order to revive the waning spirit of religious nationalism, VHP, completely out of the blue, declared “that the Ram temple construction would commence after March 2001.” Later the *Margdarshak Mandal*, the highest decision-making body of the VHP, met on October 18-19, 2000 at Goa and adopted a resolution that the date to start the Ram temple construction would be announced by the *dharma sansad* [parliament of religious leaders/sadhus] at the *Maha Kumbh* [a major religious gathering of sadhus] to be held at Allahabad in January 2001. The VHP also decided to send its activists to three lakh villages in the country . . . and collect letters in favor of temple construction.”²⁰⁵ This announcement was partly in response to an upcoming court hearing on the mosque demolition issue on December 15, 2000. Two sadhu-cum-BJP members of parliament, Swami Chinmayanand and Swami Aditya Nath [both interviewed in the next chapter] took an arm-chair approach and summarily dismissed any agitation by declaring in a

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

lackadaisical way: “there was always a temple there [at the disputed site], there is a temple there, and only a temple can come up there.”²⁰⁶

Given the lack of interest from the populist sadhus, even obscure organizations such as the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) stepped in, claiming that “the *Babri Masjid* had no religious significance and hence Muslims should hand over the disputed site as a goodwill gesture to Hindus. If that was not acceptable, the mosque could be relocated. However, since the location of Rama's birthplace cannot be changed, the temple cannot be moved.”²⁰⁷ All such arguments failed to generate any passion except among academic circles.

Faced with the prospect of the death of religion as a political force, VHP tried to resurrect the theater and ritualism that had proved so popular during the early 1990s. It decided to take a model of the proposed Ram temple from the city of Jaipur to Ayodhya, and announced that “[l]aw is not bigger than faith. If supporters of the Ram temple movement unite, the law will have to take the back seat.” The operational word was “if”, showing the extent of VHP’s lack of self confidence. In its attempt to unite sadhus and people over the Ayodhya issue, VHP imposed unilaterally as ultimatum to “remove all hurdles in the way of the construction of a Sri Ram temple at the Ramjanmabhoomi by March 12, 2002, the day of Mahashivatri [a major Hindu religious festival]. The VHP also worked out a program of chanting Ram’s name in villages from November 26, offering *jalabhishek* [water-based worship rituals] in temples from September 18 to October 16, 2001 and organizing a *sant yatra* [procession of *sadhus*] from Ayodhya to Delhi between February 18 and 25, 2002 to serve notice on Parliament and the Government to remove hurdles to the temple construction.”²⁰⁸ When the calls did not resonate, VHP and the Congress called on competing sadhus—each wanting to take the credit of building the Ram temple—at the traditional congregation of sadhus (the Kumbha Mela) on January 22, 2002 in Allahabad to discuss the issue.

The VHP made similar efforts after the Kumbha Mela, where it persuaded a group of sadhus to participate in a *chetawani yatra* (warning rally) on January 27, followed by a contentious religious ritual, called the 100-day *purnahuti yagna* [complete sacrifice]. The ritual was attended

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

more by VHP leaders and activists than the sadhus themselves. Many sadhus questioned its authenticity and scriptural legitimacy.

VHP's inventions of rituals and processions were overshadowed by a major Hindu-Muslim riot on February 27 in a small town called Godhra in Gujarat, leading to the loss of more than a thousand lives. Seizing the fervor thus created, VHP requested and received permission to conduct a symbolic worship ritual at the Ayodhya site on March 15, 2002. Later, an official of the Prime Minister's Office himself "handed over the [stone] pillars to the Additional District Magistrate (ADM) with the instruction that they be the first stone slabs for construction of a temple whenever it is and put on plinth. The VHP hailed this as an indication of the government's acceptance in principle of the demand for a Ram temple." The very next day, however, the Prime Minister expressed his pessimism about the construction of the temple and urged Hindu and Muslim representatives to negotiate. It had become clear at that sadhus were neither united nor present on the stage to revive religious nationalism that they had ushered in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

With sadhus fading from the picture, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) began excavations at the disputed site to determine whether a temple existed under the demolished mosque. A clearly defensive VHP declared that it would not accept the results of the excavations if ASI ruled against it and that it would build a new Ram temple regardless. And in order to indirectly rake up the forces of religious nationalism, it declared that Muslims should give up their mosques in the cities of Benaras [Kashi] and Mathura that clearly showed signs of ruined temples underneath the mosques. A court petition filed by a VHP supporter argued that "the excavation order would set a bad precedence [in] that anybody could demand an excavation of any religious site on the pretext that another religious structure preexisted the present one."²⁰⁹ The petition's significance was not obvious at first. The VHP supporters did not want to legitimize the excavations of Hindu temples if similar claims were made by Muslims or other religious minorities—a reminder of a 19th century event that had led to the RJB conflict, see Chapter III. At the same time, by declaring that Hindus were interested in resolving only the dispute involving the three *main* temples of Hindus' three *main* deities, the VHP petitioner was

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

trying to shut the possibility of frivolous claims from Muslims and others. The courts were not convinced.

The lack of unity inspired the VHP to continue inventing rituals in an attempt to unite Hindus. It started a ritual to enlist the support of millions of Hindus. VHP started planning to distribute religiously sanctified threads as wrist bands, maps of the proposed Ram temple, and consecrated soil from the disputed site were, all over the country between July and October 2003. Those who received the thread were asked to keep it on their wrists till the Ram temple was built.” This too failed to fire the imagination, and given the inconclusive archaeological findings, VHP went back to the only argument that it had: “Our faith is that it was the place of [Lord] Rama's birth.” This implied settling the matter in the parliament and, interestingly, “the top VHP leadership castigated the BJP and its government of betraying the *Ramjanmabhumi* movement that had catapulted them into power.”²¹⁰ So there appeared to be disunity at this level as well.

To be sure, not all sadhus had disappeared from the scene. In June 2003, a prominent sadhu more closely aligned with the Congress—the *Shankaracharya* of Kanchi, Sri Jayendra Saraswati--sent new proposals to resolve the dispute to one of the representative groups, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB). Just when some conversation started, VHP, under pressure from some sadhus, insisted on being counted in the negotiation process. The AIMPLB backtracked and rejected the demands of sadhus, including Kanchi *Shankaracharya*'s proposal that called on Indian Muslims to donate the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya for temple construction. With sadhus themselves divided, VHP kept harping on its earlier demand that only parliamentary legislation could decide the issue. But with elections around the corner, and with the sadhu unity divided, BJP could not rely on the expedient allies in its coalition government who were ideologically opposed to the temple construction. Legislation also had to wait. In order not to appear defeated, and invoking the power of sadhus, BJP Prime Minister Vajpayee and Advani pledged at the funeral of the sadhu Ramachandra Paramhans [interviewed in the next chapter] that the Ram temple would some day be built at the Ram's birthplace. (It may be recalled that the sadhu Paramhans was also the Chairman of the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas [Trust] established by VHP, but which had become dysfunctional when sadhus in it started renouncing

²¹⁰ Ibid.

their activism.)²¹¹ Paramhans's famous remarks were recalled those days—"Babar did not demolish the temple by amending the Constitution but did it by force. We too demolished the mosque by force and will construct the temple through sheer might"²¹²—any yet the unity among sadhus was lacking.

In 2003, although the Special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court hearing absolved Advani of any wrongdoing in the mosque demolition case, it was reluctant to do so in the case of a few prominent VHP leaders and the sadhu/sadhavi Uma Bharati. But even this effort languished since both the accused (the pro-Ram bloc) as well as the anti-Ram bloc (Congress and its allies) seemed to have lost interest. The case drags to this day.

The withering away of sadhu-led religion nationalism—that had brought BJP into power—is expressed by S. P. Udayakumar in the following way:

Even in the run up to the 2004 general elections, Advani always spoke about the BJP's development agenda with Ayodhya footnote. And the footnote changed depending upon the audience. While he bellowed in Mathura that the Ram temple would be built in Ayodhya and India would have Ramarajya [the ideal State conceptualized in the Epic Ramayana], he was quite mellow in Aligarh, a mostly Muslim town, saying that the Ram temple would be built through negotiations and without any bitterness.

In a comment that perhaps speaks for sadhus' individualistic temperament in general, Paramhans, a supporter of the BJP/VHP combine or more accurately the other way around, had once said "As a sadhu my duty is to ask and to whichever Prime Minister I asked [for the land for the Ram temple] either passed away or had lost power. So, I don't want to ask anything from Mr. Vajpayee [of the BJP]."²¹³ In a less subtle way, the VHP-allied sadhu, Acharya Dharmendra (interviewed in next chapter), declared sadhus' independence in the following way: "Politicians, government and MPs come and go. He [Mr. Vajpayee] is a Prime Minister today because he

²¹¹ Not only was Paramhans the most active among all sadhus associated with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, many believe he was also among the small group of people that surreptitiously installed the idols of Ram inside the disputed temple-mosque in December 1949, thereby laying the foundation of the entire nationalist movement itself.

²¹² Sharad Gupta, "VHP sadhus hasten Ram temple work", *Indian Express*, Friday, September 24, 1999

²¹³ Ayodhya issue: ball in Law Minister's court, *The Tribune*, January 28, 2002.

was present at the VHP congregation on the issue at Boat Club [where sadhus had gathered in huge numbers]. If he had not participated in that he would not have become Prime Minister.”²¹⁴

Sure enough Vajpayee’s second-in-command, BJP’s Advani, had admitted earlier: “We have no control over them [the sadhus], you deal with religious leaders yourself.”²¹⁵ To some extent this comment forewarned what was to come, and captured the essence of the splintering of sadhus when VHP called its activists and supporters to assemble once again in Ayodhya in a show force.²¹⁶

Let us take the case of the recent *Sankalp Sammelan* itself, which was to take place in Ayodhya on October 17. Compared to this year, the year 1990 had witnessed much more stringent measures to foil the VHP game. All the buses and trains had been cancelled; all routes leading to Ayodhya had been blocked. And yet, lakhs of people had come forward to court arrest and 26,000 had actually reached Ayodhya to take part in the VHP programme. But nothing of the kind was seen this year. Some VHP *karsevaks* [volunteers] did court arrest along with Ashok Singhal [the VHP leader] in the so-called Karsevakpuram, *but no local sadhu or sant took part in it. They were not there in the lists of the arrested persons, nor were they visible on the TV channels [emphasis mine].*

If one goes by the newspaper and TV reports, these *sadhus* and *sants*, who have been so far loyal to the VHP, have begun to issue statements against the same outfit. They also claim that they now well understand the real aim of the VHP’s agitations. *That is why the president of the Ramjanmabhoomi Trust [the sadhu Ramchandra Paramhans] could be seen nowhere in this ‘do or die’ struggle on October 17 even though he was very much there in Ayodhya on the day [emphasis mine]. . . .* Why the *sadhus* and *sants*, so far associated with the VHP, are increasingly turning away from it, no VHP leader shows the courage to explain. However, the reason is well known to one and all—that the people have got to the reality that the VHP’s temple agitation is not a religious movement but a gimmick for deriving political mileage. And that is why, in order to flaunt their own distinct identity, VHP leaders are finding themselves constrained to lambast their own dear leaders like Vajpayee and Advani.

There also remains the question: why the VHP had to organise its Ayodhya march and *Sankalp Sammelan* in Karsevakpuram while the same or similar programmes could well be held in the national capital and state capitals? One will note that in their meeting held in Delhi, even [sadhu] leaders like Mahant Nrityagopal Das and Mahant Aavidyanath had opposed the VHP’s latest move. . . . The VHP is annoyed that its calls for agitations are regularly failing to evoke any significant response, and its credibility is fast dwindling.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ P. V. Narsimha Rao, Ayodhya 6 December 1992, New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2006, p. 81.

²¹⁶ Shitala Singh, “Ashok Singhal & His Hindu Rashtra”, *People’s Democracy*, vol. xxvii, no. 44, November 2, 2003.

So much so that even the *sadhus* and *sants* so far associated with it are turning their faces away from this rabble-rousing outfit. This is a real cause of worry for them. Up till now, the VHP used to get a seal of approval from these same religious figures at the so-called *Sant Sammelans*. But what the outfit will do now if these very figures turn their backs upon the outfit?

Conclusion -- The Sum Total of Many Sum Totals: More than One Hundred Years of Religious Nationalism

In retrospect it seems that the four sadhus discussed in Chapter III (Dayanand, Aurobindo, Vivekanand, and Golwalkar) were not only elitist and over-individualistic, but novices compared to sadhus in the late 20th century who stood over the shoulders of their predecessors but managed to forge a temporary unity that had major political implications.²¹⁷ The hegemony of a one-party rule of the Congress came to be challenged with the rise of the BJP. It is interesting to note that while Hindu organizations and Hindu parties had always emerged in opposition to some “Other”, that was not the case with sadhus. For instance, the political party Hindu Mahasabha came into force only after the British created a separate electorate system for Muslims in 1909, where only Muslims could vote for a reserved quota of Muslim representatives. So also, RSS came into being in 1925, immediately after Gandhi’s support for the (Ottoman) Caliphate in the so-called Khilafat movement during the early 1920s. VHP emerged in order to stop religious conversion by Christian missionaries that had led to calls for autonomy and separatism in the northeast. Sadhus, on the other hand and as described in Chapter II, predated all the Others in India; and the origins of the institution of sadhus are hidden and far too complex. The images of sadhus described in that chapter also hinted at the idea that sadhus did not constitute a monolithic bloc that would naturally gravitate towards, or be used by, any one cause or any one organization. As this chapter has shown they create their own political drama and influence political outcomes.

²¹⁷ The 19th and early 20th century sadhus were elitist first and foremost, and cultural chauvinist next, because they were not addressing an Indian audience, and were obsessed with defending the idea that everything that was there in Western science and Western thought—understood in a broad sense—was already there in Vedas, waiting to be deconstructed and rediscovered, or that the Western stuff were relative cultural constructs. See Meera Nanda, Postmodernism, Hindu nationalism and ‘Vedic science’, New Delhi: Frontline: Volume 20, Issue 26, December 20, 2003 and January 02, 2004.

By comparing sadhus' responses to the events during the early 1990s with their reflections in 2008, the following chapter unpacks sadhus' relative autonomy or diversity among sadhus in an empirical manner. It looks at differences and commonalities among them to explain their unity during some period and the splintering of that unity at other times. Using interviews and perspectives of sadhus themselves, Chapter V focuses on three tiers of factors – outside, among and within sadhus – to explain the splintering of Hindu nationalism. As these interviews and the analyses in the following chapter will show, the “sum total of many sum totals” refers to the essential identity of sadhus as sadhus that becomes an important cause for religious nationalism and its undoing at the same time.

CHAPTER V

CONVERSATIONS WITH SADHUS: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RISE AND SPLINTERING OF HINDUTVA

Tying together the story lines from Chapter II and III up to this stage, it seems that sadhus are traditionally apolitical but as sadhuism evolved with the four sadhus (discussed in Chapter III) they become political actors in their own right. We see sadhus playing an increasingly important role as religious nationalism starts to become a strong political force, from a minor event in 1949 in Ayodhya to its nationwide repercussions in 1986. While all the three religion-politics models outlined in Chapter I—use or misuse of religion in competitive politics, religion as a marker for political friends and foes, and role of religion in political theater—make sense up through events leading to the destruction of the mosque, none of them adequately accounts for the demise of religious nationalism and the sudden splintering of sadhu unity. In this chapter, therefore, I examine the issue empirically by looking at the religious actors themselves as independent variables.

The previous chapter described the rise and splintering of a strain of Hindu fundamentalism during the late 20th century in India. The dramatic rise of the Hindu nationalist party BJP—breaking more than four decades of the monopoly of the Congress party—was linked with the activism of sadhus over the Ramjanmabhoomi (RJB) temple-Babri mosque (BM) issue. Given the hypothesis and the empirical focus of this thesis as laid out in Chapter I, this chapter steps inside the minds and perspectives of sadhus themselves to understand their unique and causal role in the rise and splintering of religious nationalism or Hindutva.

For this purpose I conducted two sets of interviews over a decade and a half apart.

Sample and Methodology

The first set of interviews was conducted soon after 1992 when the disputed Babri mosque was demolished. The events that led to its destruction constituted the most divisive event pitting Hindus against Muslims since India's independence in 1947. Many communal riots followed where thousands of lives were lost. I chose and interviewed 30 prominent sadhus, following them all over north India. I organized my first set of interviews around two sets of questions. The first set asked why sadhus became sadhus; i.e. out of self-interest, for altruistic reasons or obedience to their inner calling and natural propensities. The second set asked why and how they turned to social and political activism. Their responses to the second set of questions touched on a variety of issues, including secularism and minority rights, party affiliation, and rise of religious nationalism. A smaller group of 10 sadhus from the original 30 were re-interviewed in 2008, during a relatively calm period compared to 1993, to understand the reasons for the sadhus' splintering and their changing views and alliances.

On the Selection of Sadhus Interviewed: When I went for my first fieldwork in 1993, it was quite clear who the movers and shakers among sadhus were, that is, those who had spearheaded the RJB campaign that had led to the destruction of the mosque in 1982. So, instead of starting from a random sampling approach, I met the seven main pro-Hindutva sadhus that were at the height of the campaign—Uma Bharati, Sadhavi Rithambara, Mahant Avaidyanath, Swami Chinmayanand, Swami Ramchandra Paramhans, Swami Nritya Gopal Das, Acharya Dharmendra, and Swami Vam Dev Maharaj (all associated in some ways with the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas or Trust that VHP had established to help take possession of the land and the disputed structure).²¹⁸ From these sadhus I learnt and from media sources I came to learn

²¹⁸ The RJB Nyas was established by VHP on February 3, 1986, and did not have a fixed membership except for the involvement of senior sadhus listed above. These sadhus were drawn from a bigger pool of sadhus who had associated themselves informally with VHP's Dharma Sansad (Parliament of Religion), an informal platform established in 1984. RJB Nyas was established to press the Congress government to transfer the property rights of the Ayodhya site for building the "world's biggest temple." In order to counter the sadhus associated with RJB Nyas and the VHP, the Congress prime minister Narsimha Rao sought the assistance of Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati (who headed two of the four central Mutts/Hermitages of the Shaiva sadhus), and set up the Ramalaya Trust. Swaroopanand's stature and the wealth of his two hermitages were plus points, and he had always been close to Congress leaders, including Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv. The other prominent sadhu on the Ramalaya was Swami Ramnareshacharya who was somewhat annoyed with the many Vaishnav sadhus—like Ramchandra Paramhans—because they did not accept his claim to be the head of the Ramanand ascetic community. Since Ramnareshacharya was a Vaishnav sadhu with a large following—and RJB was all about Ram, the tutelary deity of the Vaishnavs—he too was asked to join the Ramalaya Trust. Mahant Gyan Das from Ayodhya, another sadhu on

of prominent sadhus who supported Congress' approach of solving the RJB conflict in an allegedly amicable way, with the participation of Muslim leaders. However, the main dissenter sadhus—organized under the Ramalaya Trust established by Congress—seemed to disagree with VHP aligned sadhus primarily over which sadhus should take the leadership roles in the construction of the Ram temple. The prominent dissenters were Shankaracharya Swaroopanand Saraswati, Mahant Gyan Das, Shankaracharya of Puri/Kanchi, and Swami Ramnareshacharya, all part of the Congress patronized Ramalaya Trust. As I moved in the sadhu community I picked up names of a few moderately pro-Hindutva sadhus who were becoming increasingly politicized. I interviewed them as well (Jagdish Muni, Ramcharitradas, Ramdas, Ramananda Haryacharya, Prem Bhandari, Sakshiji Maharaj, Ramvilas Vedanti, Swami Satyamitranand, etc, see Chapter V). I chose to also interview nationally well-known and non-aligned sadhus who were social activists (Swami Agnivesh and Mahant Veer Bhadra Mishra). I also interviewed a few completely apolitical and mystically oriented sadhus (like Somanand Baba and Phalahari Baba from Ayodhya) as a reality check in terms what sadhus as spiritual agents ought to do as far as the RJB was concerned. To close the circle, I interviewed the stridently anti-Hindutva sadhu Lal Das, who was the head priest of the RJB temple, the epicenter of the conflict.²¹⁹

the Ramalaya Trust, was an abbot of two other famous temples in the Ramkot area where the RJB temple is located, the Hanumangarhi and the Nageshwarnath temples. According to journalistic sources, he was friendly with Swaroopanand and perceived the attention given to RJB as a loss of his stature in Ayodhya.

Neither of these two trusts were financial shells for raising money. Many journalists and political observers have claimed that, in setting up the Ramalaya Trust, Rao revealed his interest in not allowing the BJP to take credit for building the Ram temple; and to some extent this suited BJP also because the Hindu nationalist campaign was left simmering.

²¹⁹ The sadhus today contrast with their political reformer predecessors of the 19th century in terms of the nature and degree of formal and modern education they received. In contrast to their 19th century counterparts, the sadhus in the RJB uprising were less educated in the modern education system, although two of my interviewees were university level professors and one a doctor. Others were trained, even if to a high level, in Sanskrit texts and traditionalizing rather than modernizing educational systems. In general, sadhus of the Shaiva sampradaya (or community) for whom the tutelary deity is Lord Shiva, the level of formal education is higher—because they stress the path of knowledge—than among sadhus from the Vaishnava and the Shakta sampradayas, for whom devotion to God is what is most important.

According to a 1978 study conducted by B. D. Tripathi, almost all sadhus considered “educated” received their education either from Sanskrit-based institutions—studying classics and epics, logic and argumentation, grammar, ancient Hindu law, Hindu philosophy, and Sanskrit—or under some guidance from their gurus in hermitages. Based on a sample of 500 sadhus, Tripathi found 10% sadhus completing graduate and post-graduate degrees (called *Acharyas* and *Shastris*); 12% completing high school; 8% in the informally educated category; and 70% “illiterates” or self-taught. (See, B. D. Tripathi, *Sadhus of India: A Sociological View*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1978.)

Among the sadhus I interviewed, only two (Swami Agnivesh and Veer Bhadra Mishra) received “English-medium” education. But they were well-versed in Sanskrit as well. Agnivesh was a professor at Calcutta University teaching

Although the divisive temple/mosque conflict formed the immediate context, in order to understand the role and perspectives of sadhus, I started out with a first-order classification of sadhus into three broad types based on their views about Hindu nationalism or, as some would like to call it, Hindutva or Hindu fundamentalism. This suggested that at one end are the most prominent local Ayodhya sadhu as well as nationally known ones who were stridently for Hindu nationalism or Hindutva; in the middle were those who were moderates or ambivalent with respect to the temple-mosque conflict and Hindutva in general; and on the other end were sadhus who were indifferent to or stridently opposed to Hindutva and to BJP and its religious wing, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). However, it quickly became apparent that while these three broad types could provide a heuristic device to organize the sadhus, there are considerable variations within each type and sadhus don't fit into clear cut categories. As the concluding section of this chapter indicates, this reflects the inherent nature of sadhus as free-thinking individuals who don't easily subscribe to a given set of views or types. Therefore, a broad three-type characterization could only offer stereotyped guide about the general views of each sadhu, which did not do justice to the nuances and complexities of their perspectives. For a more detailed analysis, we need to examine the disaggregated views of each sadhu on key issues and how they contrast and compare with one another. The thesis therefore follows this more disaggregated approach to adequately capture the complexity and variation in views across sadhus.

This chapter is organized into two sections. The first part that includes the most prominent sadhus on the national scene—the movers and the shakers—shows why became politically active, and how they raised the temper of Hindu nationalism. The second part accounts for the

Law and Management, and Veer Bhadra Mishra taught hydraulic engineering at the Benaras Hindu University. Both taught in English. The largely self-taught Uma Bharati is also fluent in English, a skill she had to master, given the fact that she gave religious discourses to immigrant Indian audiences more comfortable with English.

Every sadhu I interviewed—and have met since childhood—was fluent in Hindi, including those from south India. Among the four sadhus discussed in Chapter III, Aurobindo was the only one who had received classical Western education, and was proficient in Greek, French, and Latin, besides English, Hindi, and Bengali.

To the extent that there may be any correlation between education and class/occupational background, B. D. Tripathi notes that between 50% to 75% of sadhus come from low to lower middle income group and about 50% in farming before becoming sadhus.

splintering of that unity and fervor. It analyses that change on three levels: (i) Level 1: by showing sadhus' views on how *outside* institutions (including political parties) may have acted as counterforces; (ii) Level 2: by describing the diversity *among* sadhus on certain key issues, a factor that may have led to their disunity; and (iii) Level 3: by showing how the commonality *within* sadhus across the three types itself undermined or splintered the rise of religious nationalism. Having propelled the Hindu nationalist party BJP on the national political scene, the political significance of sadhus will constitute the subject of the concluding chapter VI.

PART I: THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE MOVERS AND SHAKERS

Several themes emerge in the discourse about how and why the prominent sadhus contributed to the rise of religious nationalism. The interviews summarized below provide glimpses inside the minds of sadhus, and help lay out the main issues that passionately engaged and motivated them. These include: their self-image as inheritors and protectors of Hindu culture; their self-image as righteous religious actors with a special access to God's will; undoing historical injustice against Hindus; a deep attachment to and significance of Ram; a sign of the deepening of democracy; a reaction against secularism and appeasement of Muslims by the Congress, or a visceral bias against non-Hindus and their Hindu protectors; the availability of an organized platform created by VHP; and the need to motivate "intrinsically tolerant" Hindus against a violent and an intolerant enemy. What is important is not just the themes that emerge, but the populist manner in which they were invoked. *That is an important reason why many quotes have been reproduced rather than paraphrased.* These sadhus energized other sadhus and mobilized lay Hindus to the Hindu nationalist cause.

Ramchandra Paramhans: A Lifelong Commitment to Ram and a Campaign for Raising Hindu Awareness Against Historical Wrongs

The Ayodhya face-off has ended in a whimper with a "shila daan" [foundation laying ritual] on March 15 [2002]. But one man who kept the entire nation on tenterhooks with his political histrionics was Mahant Ramchandra Das Paramhans, Chief of the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas (RJN). Seeing the kind of commitment being shown by the self-claimed 92-year-old Sadhu, many would easily take him to be an original inhabitant of Ayodhya.

Paramhans . . . has been right at the heart of every battle over Ayodhya inside or outside courts for the past 50 years. . . Whether it was the shilanyas [foundation laying] in 1989, the first Kar Seva [volunteer service for temple construction] in 1990 or the second one in 1992 when the Babri Masjid was brought down, the Mahant was always there.

The Tribune
Chandigarh, India, Thursday, March 21, 2002

Swami Ramachandra Paramhans was born in a Brahmin family from Chhapra district in Bihar, sometime around 1910. At the age of 12 he left his home and wandered in the company of sadhus before settling down as a sadhu in Ayodhya. In 1934 Paramhans played an important role in a violent campaign that left the disputed Babri mosque structure damaged. A collective fine on the people of Ayodhya was levied by the British government. He came into real limelight first in 1949 when, with five other individuals, he sneaked inside the disputed temple/mosque at night on December 23rd and placed the idol of lord Ram in the “*sanctum sanctorum*” of the disputed temple. The Congress government intervened: While Hindu worship from outside the RJB-BM structure was allowed to continue all throughout, Muslim prayers (*namaaz*) were not permitted to take place after 1949. Soon after this incident Paramhans petitioned the district court “against removing the receiver who was appointed by the Centre after Ram’s idol “appeared” and for allowing puja [worship] to go on without state intervention.”²²⁰ He patiently fought cases, staking a claim to the disputed temple land in the name of Ram, withdrawing it only in the mid 1980s as the matter remained in a legal limbo, and because Hindu and Muslim representatives continued to squabble over the nature and ownership of the disputed structure.

Paramhans was seen as the most committed of all sadhus in the RJB campaign, but for many he was also the sadhu most prone to histrionic acts. He even threatened to immolate himself and consume poison if the Ram temple was not built. In addition, the money and the muscle of his traditional Digambar akhara [organization of sadhus of a certain sect or order]—controlling authority of 18 akharas which oversee the Kumbh Mela, the most important religious fair—made him a much sought after figure. As reported by Radhika Ramaseshan,²²¹

²²⁰ Radhika Ramaseshan, “*Delhi packs flight to funeral—PM, deputy and Sangh stalwarts to attend mahant’s last rites,*” Calcutta: The Telegraph, August 1, 2003.

²²¹ Ibid.

In Ayodhya, Paramhans “owned” innumerable temples and smaller *akharas*. The most important was Maniram ki Chavni, managed by his confidant, Nriya Gopal Das [interviewed later].

[D]espite his constant barbs at minorities, the “secularists” and, of late, Vajpayee and Advani [BJP leaders], Ayodhya lore had it that Paramhans’ “best friend” was Mohammad Hashim Ansari, the prime litigant on behalf of the Sunni Waqf Board for the ownership of the disputed land.

This relationship with the main Muslim litigant—regarding whether a Ram temple was destroyed to build a mosque and over ownership titles to land—enhanced his status as a valuable negotiating tool with Muslims and the Congress. It is claimed that he agreed to persuade the Hindu nationalist organization RSS to drop its claims to two other disputed temple/mosque structures if the Ram temple issue was resolved in his favor. In other words, Paramhans is regarded to have made the RSS/VHP/BJP combine focus its energies on the RJB campaign and help in its unprecedented rise. Also, his status as a local Ayodhya sadhu and his role in initiating the RJB controversy were a major factors in his appointment as the chairman of the influential Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas (RJN) and the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir Nirman Samiti, committees of many sadhus set up by the VHP to help build the Ram temple after the destruction of the Babri mosque. Rivalry among sadhus over who ought to lead the RJB campaign led another sadhu trustee of the temple Trust to “expose” Paramhans as a “fugitive” from law. Paramhans escaped a fatal assassination attempt, believed to be a result of long-standing but routine disputes among sadhus over temple property. He died in August 2003. I interviewed him in 1993 and 1996.

Paramhans contextualized his general views on the rise of Hindu activism in India by contrasting the supposedly mythical tolerance of Hinduism with Islam.

No one in this world is in danger from Hinduism. But there is a danger in Islam. Even Islam is facing danger from within, not from Hinduism. See the fight between Iran and Iraq, and Iraq has a problem with Kuwait. Saudi Arabia, which prides itself as a Muslim state because Mecca is there, even Saudi Arabia did not shed tears when Iraq was attacked. But this *sala* [expletive] dilapidated structure of the RJB mosque has suddenly become so dear to them [Muslims] where no *namaaz* [prayers] has been offered for many many years. I have been seeing this since when I was 15 years old when I came to Ayodhya and I am 87 years old now. Muslims never worshipped there and never went there. How can he? All around there are Hindu places of worship and bells are ringing and pujas [Hindu prayers] being performed. The real rupture came about when Pakistan was created [in 1947].

We Hindus have no problems with how Muslims worship. We did not go around breaking their places of worship. We could have broken other mosques but Ayodhya was a special case. If you break someone's special place of worship you will definitely have to live with the consequences. History is a witness to this. Unless such historical injustices are resolved Hindu-Muslim relationship will never be peaceful. The British left the dispute unresolved in order to divide the two communities and maintain their rule over them. They always tried to create a fight between the two communities.

Given that overarching frame of the tolerant Hindus, Paramhans traced his own sporadic political activism to a more sustained one around the RJB temple-mosque conflict in the following manner, beginning with a historical account to a personal justification:

This [RJB-BM] dispute has been going on since the time of Babur [in the 16th century] and 76 fights over this issue has [have?] been recorded. This was the 77th attempt and we have succeeded. Hindus were never quiet about this issue. . . . But this RJB was in a limbo, it was neither a temple nor mosque. The same is true with Krishnajanmabhoomi temple in Mathura and the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Benaras.²²² And this fight over RJB temple-mosque in which I participated was not a fight over Hindu-Muslim relations but over the character of Ram who was revered by everyone in contrast to the character of the Muslim Babur who destroyed so many places of worship. The temple at Somnath in Gujarat had been destroyed but was later rebuilt with great support from [the Congress leader] Patel. If the other 3 temples [mentioned above] had been liberated then, there would have been none of the problems that we have today. But we Hindus waited for so long . . . We have always considered [genuine] mosques to be sacred and pure places of worship. Hindus have this natural feeling towards sacred places, but we fight only when we have exhausted all peaceful ways to resolve the dispute. We forgot all about the many many temples that had been destroyed, but we only asked for three, to give them back to us. But the Muslims did not agree because of the political factor: Congress wanted the vote of the Muslims as a bloc and they tried to appease Muslims by siding with them.

After dwelling on this brief account of how he and Hindus had been wronged by history and politics, Paramhans switched to a more personal note on his activism as a sadhu.

All in my family were leader types, intellectuals. And Sonapur area [in the state of Bihar] from where I come has traditionally been a revolutionary area, very progressive. From childhood I was impressed by the [anti-British] revolutionary Jogendra Shukla. And I was supporting Congress [against British] all throughout. . . I still wear the Congress

²²² These other two temples, besides the Ramjanmabhoomi temple, also have a mosque attached to the original temples associated with Lord Krishna and Lord Shiva. As in the case of the RJB temple, the dispute involves faith *versus* historical evidence, if any, about the destruction of pre-existing temples. Although sadhus did protest against these two temples after Independence, the case of the Ramjanmabhoomi is unique and more potent because the claim is that Lord Ram was born at that very exact spot. The RJB case is also a product of a much more protracted struggle on the part of Ayodhya sadhus than the other two.

khaddar [home spun cotton]. But even in Congress I was in the pro-Hindu Patel faction, the revolutionary dissidents, who were not embarrassed to show their pro-Hindu sentiments in public. When [the pro-Hindu] Tandon was removed from Presidency by [the secular Congress leader] Nehru I did not like it and came to Hindu Mahasabha [a Hindu nationalist party] . . . [and when] Hindu Mahasabha started to decline, I came towards Jan Sangh [the precursor of BJP]. After Emergency [in 1975], I gave up all this political stuff. But even before I became involved with VHP later, I had already made liberation of the RJB temple as the as the aim of my work because I was from Ayodhya.

It [the activism for the Ram temple] was *natural* [emphasis mine], for Ram is for us is our *ishta* [personal symbol of the divine for Vaishnav sadhus like Paramhans] and is Maryada Purushottam [one embodying the highest human virtues]. To see His temple under siege by a Muslim mosque, even after Independence, and in a state of ruin was an insult. Because I was a devotee of Ram I took the campaign in my hands and gave it a new form. I had the idol placed inside the alleged mosque in 1949. I had to go to prison many times for this, I had to overcome many obstacles, and I was implicated in many court cases. I fought many cases and even went to the length of saying that I would immolate myself if the temple is not liberated. Even now [1993] I am not free from CBI [Criminal Bureau of Investigations] and raids are conducted. I had resolved that RJB would be the most important part of my life as a sadhu. It was my vow then and still is my vow now that unless RJB comes in control of Hindus I will not let go and will not step inside the RJB temple or in Krishna Janmabhoomi temple in Mathura or in the Vishwanath temple in Kashi, Benaras. *Involvement in the RJB campaign is not a political battle for me and I am not politically motivated. Ram, for whom I left my parents, my brothers and sisters and friends, for whom I left my home and everything, for whom I remained unmarried and for whom I vowed to lead a life of worship—how could I tolerate a disgraced and blemished structure there in RJB, even after Independence [in 1947 and after formation of Pakistan; emphasis mine].*

For Paramhans, then, the influence of his revolutionary upbringing, and his attachment to Lord Ram in particular, explain his involvement with other sadhus in broadening the Hindutva campaign around the RJB issue. Although unity with like-minded organizations was natural for Paramhans, he considers the RJB issue as *his* fight and *his* personal cause, and believed that it had been taken up by others.

Because RSS is a supporter of Hindutva, I support it and the VHP. And I support the BJP because it took up *my cause* [emphasis mine] of the RJB temple and even gave up power in four states while fighting for that cause. Today when no one wants to give up a political seat, the BJP gave up chief ministers in four states for this cause [after Congress dismissed them following the mosque destruction]. There will be no greater ungrateful person than I if I did not support that party when that disgraceful structure [the mosque] that had humiliated us for hundreds of years was brought down.

For Paramhans, the political activism of religious elites or the rise of religion as a political force in India—around the RJB-BM issue or more generally—is a natural and a non-reactionary phenomenon in the modern world.

When it was about Ram, it had to become popular. When [the film producer] Ramanand Sagar took it as the subject of a film, it also became very popular. When we with the VHP touched the subject, Jai Shri Ram [hail Ram!!] reverberated everywhere in the country and the world.

And turning from Ram and Hindu culture, the old sadhu in his mid-80's, with long flowing white hair and beard, confessed with a youthful twinkle:

My aim is not simply to build a temple but to create the awareness of being a Hindu among Hindus. Hindus are losing their self respect and self pride as Hindus. So if Hindus feel Hindu enough then these mutts and ashrams [hermitages] will remain and if they remain then I will remain a mahant [abbot] here and people will come to me. *So I am trying to protect myself yaar [buddy]!!! I am not into all this to save Hinduism!!! [emphasis mine]. . . .* I like being with young people and have masti [fun], even though you may bore me to death with your questions. I am 87 now. It is fun. What do you want, some water. You must be thirsty.

To summarize: Although Paramhans rallied many sadhus to the RJB cause and VHP's pro-Hindutva campaign in the late 80's and early 90's, his activism was rooted in his role as one among the several sadhus who precipitated the RJB-BM conflict in 1949. The reasons for his involvement in the 1934 campaign that damaged the mosque, as well as in the 1949 event where an idol was placed inside the disputed structure, were not unusual. He cited historical wrongs committed by Muslim rulers against places held sacred by Hindus, who were tolerant ; he nurtured a personal attachment towards Ram, his tutelary deity; and he wanted to be the main attraction for Hindu devotees in Ayodhya. These factors explain his desire and his ability to rally sadhus and Hindu youth to the RJB and the Hindutva causes. Finally, his close relationship with local Muslim leaders gave him a status and authority that helped him rise above the fray of competitive sadhus in his historic campaign.

Uma Bharati: A Campaign Against Historical Wrongs – and a Democratic Surge in Hindu Sentiments

If Ramchandra Paramhans helped initiate the RJB-BM conflict in 1949, Uma Bharati easily qualifies as among the most strident pro-Hindutva sadhavis [female for sadhus] who popularized and sustained the campaign four decades later. Her anti-Muslim and pro-Hindutva speeches

rallied many other sadhus to the RJB cause and energized many thousands of Hindu youth to take to the streets. In fact, so incendiary were her speeches that authorities arrested her soon after the destruction of the Babri mosque, only to release her for lack of evidence that she had had a direct causal role in the destruction of the mosque.

Uma Bharati was born on May 3, 1959 in Dunda village in the state of Madhya Pradesh's Tikamgarh district. She started giving religious discourses as a child, and her popularity as a naturally gifted speaker helped her overcome the barriers of having been born into a farmer's family from the backward Lodhi community. Under the royal patronage of the late Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia of Gwalior—one of her frequent listeners—Uma Bharati traveled extensively within India and outside. Her fiery oratory and her commitment to the Hindutva cause attracted the BJP, the VHP, and their ideological mentor, the RSS. At the age of 25 she lost her first run for the Kahjuraho's Lok Sabha parliamentary seat because of the pro-Congress sentiment that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Capable of generating unrivaled passions, her phenomenal rhetorical skills made her into one of the most well known personalities in the Ram Janambhoomi temple-mosque (RJB) dispute. After serving as the vice-president of the Madhya Pradesh unit of the BJP, and riding on her status in the RJB movement, she won the Khajuraho Member of Parliament (MP) seat in 1989, 1991, 1996 and 1998, and the Bhopal seat in 1999. Although she was seen as a religious character because of her discourses and the garb of a holy person that she wore since her childhood days, she was initiated as a *sadhavi* only in 1991.

She served BJP in various capacities: as President of BJP's youth wing, Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha; as Minister of State for Human Resource Development in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government; and in ministerial portfolios of tourism, youth affairs and sports, and coal and mines in the BJP's Vajpayee government. She rose to the highest rank in her political career by winning the 2003 Madhya Pradesh assembly elections with an overwhelming majority to become the country's first woman *sadhavi* chief minister. I interviewed her in 1993 and 2008.

Uma Bharati believes she became politicized after her mother's death in 1981. She had grown depressed, but it was the beginning of a period of reading and reflection. After emerging from her cocoon, she stopped touring the nation and started to work on problems faced by farmers

(like her father) and laborers in and around her village. Her rhetorical skills proved very useful in motivating and organizing them for local rural development.

[Even before her mother's death] when I used to visit my mother in between my religious discourses, I had a very close look at poverty and disparities in the villages. It was then that I started a movement, resembling a semi-naxalite [Maoist-like] movement that focused on the condition of people [in the local rural area] who were very poor and exploited.

Then I became active again in 1983 [after mother's death]. But I gave up the pravachans [religious discourses]. I started taking interest in politics, in revolutionary thought. My age at that time, I was about 22 then, and you know at that age revolutionary thoughts come to your mind easily. So I started moving about in my village and started a farmer's and a labor movement. Then the BJP people learnt that Uma Bharati had taken to this kind of work. They offered me a place in the organization [her "fan", the ex-Queen of Bhopal and BJP leader Vijaya Raje Scindia was instrumental on this front]. And in 1984 I came into the BJP [as state vice president].

Blaming Muslim leaders for the emergence of the RJB conflict—and her involvement in it thereafter—Uma Bharati gives the following account:

[T]he dispute before 1986 was being dealt with through the courts in a normal legal manner. It was because of the constant appeal by Ramchandra Paramhans [interviewed earlier] that the court ordered the opening of locks in 1986. A Babri Masjid Protection Committee was formed soon afterwards which also had members from the Congress and the Janata Dal party. They, the Muslims and their Congress sympathizers, insisted that *namaaz* [Muslim prayers] would be offered at the Babri Masjid. The Muslim organization opposing the opening of the locks was the Babri Masjid Action Committee and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. . . . It was in reaction to their demands after the locks were opened that a countrywide agitation erupted and the RJB political campaign started.

I took up the RJB campaign later and held political offices later. I took up sanyaas [formally initiated as a sadhavi] only when I was in the parliament for the second time. So I was in politics before I became a sadhavi. But even when I won the [national] elections from the Khajurao seat in 1989 I campaigned not just on the Ramjanmabhoomi platform but was also very active about issues that mattered a lot to the poor and the farmers, such as economic and social exploitation, especially among the backward castes [like hers]. I would talk to them a lot because that is what I had done as a child, giving religious discourses. The BJP invited me to join them and offered me a ticket to run for elections. That is how I went to the parliament. Because I had great faith in Hinduism and because I was a religious figure the BJP asked me to get involved with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement also.

Uma Bharati explains why she never felt she had abandoned the religious side of her identity in her “secular” work with BJP, a factor that would eventually become critical in her success in rallying sadhus and Hindus to the Hindutva cause:

No, everything seemed to be the same. Because my nature had not changed, and our close colleagues were also like that. Besides, our party [BJP] is such that it has mostly dharmic (religious/righteous) types of people in it. If I had gone to a party whose ideology was completely opposed to my own, I surely would have felt a sense of shock. But BJP’s [Hindu nationalist] ideology is the same as mine, and the match has been there even when I was a kid, for I have been in contact with the Sangh [RSS] right from childhood. I met *parampujya* Guruji [most respected Golwalkar] when I was 9 or 10 years old.

Uma Bharati continued to work on a range of non-religious issues even after she first became a BJP member of parliament at the center in 1989. According to her, the tensions and manipulations of routine politics soon seemed to be taking its toll and she seriously considered leaving politics altogether:

I wanted to leave everything. Because I felt that politics is not my cup of tea. . . . I felt I would go mad and so I should leave. It was like when you suddenly feel very tired. I did not want to leave the party, but only frontal and formal politics. But an unusual event occurred then. I did not even imagine that such could happen. If anyone hears this they will think I am silly. So I had decided within me that I will leave everything and had written a letter about it which was published in the newspapers. I had actually left Delhi and was in Maihar, a very famous place of religious pilgrimage. I was watching television there. I do not usually get time to watch television and that day I found time to watch. They were showing the Chanakya [4th century B.C. political economist, called the Indian Machiavelli] serial and I was watching that. See then, that day he was saying, “So you will leave everything? You are a coward.” [Starts laughing.] “So you will leave like cowards? Will you leave the reigns of power with rogues? What could be a greater crime than this?” It appeared that the Chanakya knew I would sit down that day in front of television in a very dejected mood [big laugh].

After this “divine” revelation that seemed to have rejuvenated her, Uma Bharati moved fairly quickly into a more focused role as a religious figure, rallying sadhus and Hindus around the politically charged RJB issue. She now aimed her oratory against Muslims, and was soon recognized as a passionately driven sadhavi by some, or a rabble rouser by others. There was a buzz among many disenchanted Hindu youth, given Uma Bharati’s youth, gender, and aggressiveness. Heard in many of her speeches, the following is a typical sample of her reasoning that rallied many sadhus and Hindu youth:

The Muslims are behaving in an anti-democratic way because Ayodhya has no [religious] significance for the Muslims. This is not a historical fight for the Muslims but it is a historical fight for the Hindus. Fights involving Ajmer Sharif, Baba Haji Malang [sacred

places in India for Muslims] must be important for Muslims, but Ayodhya, Benaras, Mathura have no religious significance for Muslims. All this is politics and has been politicized [to get Muslim votes]. This is Muslim fundamentalism and humiliation of Hindus. It is a democratic right of Hindus to build the temple and Muslims should hand the place over to Hindus; that is democracy. I think Muslims should give something to this country. Even if one religious place is destroyed by a Muslim leader [Babur] and a second religious mosque is built over the first one, the original religious place has more legitimacy. You can have a democratic referendum [on the RJB issue] and let us stick by the results. Muslim organizations are just creating trouble, this is nonsense, bloody nonsense!!

As far as politics goes many sadhus joined the freedom movement against the British. But the Muslim League [and some of their religious leaders] wanted partition and a new nation. Today many of them are behaving the same way. You know [the Muslim leader] Syed Shahabuddin burns the copy of the Indian Constitution and they refuse to sing “Vande Mataram” [national song]. And they have a problem with raising the Indian flag So the Hindus reacted because the Muslims and the Congress [who appeased them for votes] were acting against them.

Uma Bharati summarizes the rise of sadhus’ political activism by equating it with sadhus’ success in persuading people in a dispassionate and a democratic manner. Ironically, in doing so she underplays the widely held view of Uma Bharati as the strident rabble rouser in the RJB campaign.

Democracy cannot function on passions. . . We cannot base it on sentiments and intensity of a few [i.e., Muslims]. The solution is that you must propagate your ideas in society to which you have become so passionately attached. This is what has happened with our RJB issue. People accepted it and with such depth and intensity that we [sadhus] were left behind and they moved ahead. We kept saying get down, but they got down only after breaking it!!!

I do not approve of religious fundamentalism. These are anti-democratic activities. But when religious leaders get involved in social activities, including campaigns to build temples at Ayodhya, Benaras, and Mathura, those are OK and those trends can be called deepening of democracy. Democracy means for the people, by the people, of the people. So if the sentiments of a majority of the people support temple building then to act on that basis is democratic.

She echoed the views of another important sadhu, the ex-Shankaracharya **Swami**

Satyamitrinand of Haridwar:

This campaign was never one opposed to society, it was not against Muslims as such. It was a dispute over *history* [emphasis mine] and a particular place. No one really wanted to break that, but when a mob gets into frenzy, then even a leader at that time does not have control over it. They all said later that they did not intend things to happen that way. I was a member of the temple building Trust. I said that the mosque was really a festering

sore on the body of the nation spreading hatred. And when the sore becomes dangerous as in gangrene, then even the leg has to amputated. This made the campaign go forward.

To sum up: Uma Bharati characterizes sadhus' activism in the RJB cause and the rise of religion as a political force as natural and democratic. It was natural in the sense that historical injustice that had been bottled up suddenly found an expression when the locks on the RJB-BM structure were opened in 1986, when the Congress prime minister tried to appease Hindu sentiments after succumbing to the pressures of Muslim clerics and overturning a court judgment in the Shah Bano case (see Chapters I and IV). And it was a democratic surge because people, i.e., the majoritarian Hindu community, simply responded to the call of the sadhus whom they revered as holy symbols. As far as her own involvement is concerned, she believes that her background as a religious preacher since childhood days and her long association with the RSS compelled BJP to ask her to become active in the RJB campaign. As quoted earlier, she firmly believes that her activism around RJB and Hindu nationalism was an intellectually honest one, and not colored by anti-Muslim sentiments. At the same time she feels her propensity to fight for Hindu causes was even more deep rooted. Even before she became a sadhavi in 1991, Uma Bharati recalls a childhood incident when a brave Hindu sadhu died while saving her from drowning, only to be reborn within her own self and as one who spoke and acted through her, politically or otherwise.

Mahant Avidyanath: A Fight to Safeguard Hindu Culture and Strengthen Hindu Society

Mahant Avidyanath was a senior BJP Member of Parliament in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) and the founding chairman of the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas, a Trust of sadhus organized by the VHP to help build the Ram temple after the destruction of the Babri mosque. Even after leaving the parliament, he continues to head the RJB Trust. He is also the mahant (abbot) of the immensely rich Gorakhnath temple complex in the city of Gorakhpur—a bastion of Hindu nationalism—in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), and belongs to the religious community of the Gorakhnath sampradaya, founded by the famous yogi Gorakhnath. Before being elected to the Lok Sabha on the BJP ticket thrice, he had been in the UP state assembly for 14 years with the nationalist party, the Hindu Mahasabha, in a seat left vacant after the death of his guru, the sadhu mahant Digvijaynath. I interviewed him in 1993, 1994, and 2008.

Avaidyanath's understanding of the rise of sadhus and religion as a political force mirrors his own journey from sadhu to politician. The themes he raised broad themes raised —protecting Hindu culture, strengthening and unifying Hindu culture, and resentment against Muslims and India's partition—are fairly common among movers and shakers of the RJB campaign.

Being a sadhu does not mean that I have to be absorbed perpetually in worship of the divine or in ascetic practices. . . . I joined the parliament as a sadhu and many people felt that this was all for power or politics, and I also wondered if I had changed my life direction. . . . But no, I am not meant to be limited to singing religious songs and indulging in spiritual reflections. What is happening around me is also of legitimate concern to me. There is history that informs me, that the dharma [roughly, religion] in which I believe, the spiritual heritage that I identify with, and the values that I cherish—for the continued existence of these it is not sufficient that we restrict ourselves to ascetic practices and spread our message [through religious discourses]. All our religious, spiritual, and cultural values cannot remain stable unless society is strong or unified. Because it is my understanding that our borders at one time extended till Indonesia and in our times Pakistan and Bangladesh as well were within our territories. But now when the Hindu society is weak or non-existent, all our cultural, spiritual, or religious thoughts—however valuable and important they may be—are getting to be meaningless. Nothing is left now; neither the culture, nor the religion; neither Lords Ram nor Krishna; neither Ramayana nor the Shreemad Bahgwad Gita [the two main Hindu religious epics]. Nothing is left you see. All this was so vibrant once—even in Sindh, Punjab, and the Frontiers that are now in Pakistan—but ever since Pakistan came into being, most of all this declined. So even though I have taken up the cause of Hindu politics despite being a sadhu, it is only to safeguard our cultural and spiritual heritage, and for that it is necessary that Hindu society is strengthened and its advocates are supported strongly in our representative democracy. So I am not doing all this for some petty political purpose, but in order to safeguard the historical, cultural, and religious heritage that constitutes our identity.

The person's whose *shishya* [religious disciple] I became—Mahant Digvijayanathji—was a social reformer and a freedom fighter during the struggle for Independence. At that time he was working with the Congress. Later he felt that there was no particular sympathy within Congress for Hindu sentiments, and so he joined the Hindu Sabha party, and later became its chairman as well. . . . After his death I won his seat in a bye-election. I always remained on the Hindu Sabha ticket and have fought, often alone, for the one cause that brought me to politics, and that, as I have told you, is to unite Hindus in this society. There are many problems in our society—untouchability, inegalitarian attitudes, casteism being the worst of them. *You see, no matter how important a thing a religious leader says, the media does not regard it as worthwhile. But even if you are a newcomer in politics, the media will listen to you and help you spread your message [emphasis mine].* I had been organizing feasts where harijans [untouchables] ate with people of other castes, and I spoke out against these social ills at many religious/public forums. I felt that I would be taken more seriously if I did all this from a political platform. And so politics.

According to Avidyanath, the rise of religion as a political force rests in part on the fact that VHP provided a single platform from which sadhus from different ascetic communities could speak on issues that united them.²²³

There are bound to be differences in opinion among average Hindus, but that is not the case in the sadhu community. We have our differences in our different traditions of worship, but we agree in our broader thinking and that common framework has to do with our emphasis on nationalism and Hindu-ness. You might know that at this time heads of all the different Hindu sectarian orders are represented on the VHP forum, and all of them agree on the decline of [Hindu] society. For example, at the dharma sansad [religious parliament] at Udipi, heads of 109 orders passed a joint resolution condemning untouchability and declaring it to be no part of Hindu dharma [religion]. . . . Similarly, we jointly spoke out against the dowry system and other backward-looking practices and urged the government to implement policies that would enable every person to become educated. Of course we have our differences in religious practices and worship traditions, but there are no significant animosities amongst us at the personal level. Even on religious/spiritual matters we believe that the object of our ultimate concern is the same, and here I include all religions. . . . Muslims with their Khuda [Allah] or Christians with their God. We are one because we are pursuing different paths to gain knowledge of the same essence.

Equating his own motivations with those of sadhus in general, Avidyanath felt that sadhu political activism is the product of decades of discontent. The RJB was a catalyst, a crucible out of which sadhu unity emerged.

[T]he day India got partitioned, Pakistan was created and became an Islamic state. From that day onwards India became a Hindu nation, but even in the Constitution this is called India and not a Hindu nation. So our first aim is to have this nation declared a Hindu nation. But that does not mean establishing a religious state, and it does not imply that Muslims, Christians, or Parsees [Zoroastrians] would not be allowed to live in the country. . . . You know that even during Muslim rule, this was called Hindustan. . . . In the term Hindustan, you do get the faint suggestion that this is a special place of Hindus.

²²³ The organization of sadhus is taken up as a separate issue in Section III of this chapter. It is important, however, to keep in mind that a much larger organization of sadhus than the one Avidyanath refers to exists—at least on paper—called the Bharat Sadhu Samaj [Society], with over 40,000 member sadhus. According to the journalist Rajiv Malik, “it is an all-India organization of sadhus, saints and ascetics formed back in 1956 for the purpose of bringing together the holy men of India. Not to meditate, mind you, but to direct their wisdom and insight toward education and constructive social service activities for all-round development of the country and betterment of the world on the basis of truth, nonviolence, fearlessness, equality and unity. . . . It has been, many say, unfairly characterized as affiliated with the Congress Party. No doubt it has been supported by Congress (and other) politicians, but it remains financially and morally independent of both government and political parties.” See, Rajiv Malik, “Can 40,000 Holy Men Shepherd India’s Future?” New Delhi: Hinduism Today, October 1994.

In essence, what Avidyanath seems to be referring to is a VHP-supported organization of like-minded sadhus. My interview with Swami Harinarayanand, the General Secretary of the Bharat Sadhu Samaj, is among my conversations with the moderate sadhus and underscores that difference.

But to demonstrate their secular credentials, the framers of the Constitution called this land India. So our first aim in politics is to make it legitimate once again the idea of this being a Hindu nation.

Our second aim in joining politics is to ensure that personal laws are the same for all citizens. . . Today there are different laws on the basis of religion or minority status. Muslims are allowed to marry four times. This is absurd in a democracy. . . . While you subject the majority to family planning controls, you allow a minority group the freedom from such controls and help that community to increase its population. . . . Why are minority institutions given special privileges? The temptation, of getting special privileges, is breaking up the Hindu society. For example, monks of the Ram Krishna Mission in Calcutta petitioned in the high court that they were not Hindus, and wanted the government to declare them non-Hindus. Buddhists and Jains also want themselves designated as non-Hindus. The Sikhs have made use of article 125 of the Constitution many times in their attempt to declare themselves non-Hindus. All these people consider it foolish not to take advantages of special privileges granted to minorities. . . . When I asked the Arya Samaji [a Hindu religious order] why he was abandoning the Hindu fold, he said that by doing so they could remain free of government's attempts to look into their finances. These double standards of the government are disastrous for the unity of the country.

Our third aim in politics is to remove from this country all signs of bondage, that is all those signs which perpetually remind us that we were once a people ruled by foreigners [Muslims, but not British]. For instance, a mosque was built on Ramjanmabhoomi and another was built on Krishnajanmabhoomi temple. Thousands of temples were destroyed during the Muslim rule. But now that we are an independent country, all these signs of dominance must go. We are not demanding justice in every one of the thousand cases, but we are interested only in those where signs of a temple have deliberately been left intact. Have you ever been to Varanasi? You must have then seen how a mosque has been built after destroying a temple. But note that an important wall from the old temple has been left intact and incorporated in the new mosque. There are Hindu bells, conch, the trident, and all that. Even the image of Nandi [the bull of Lord Shiva] has been left intact. Why? Because for thousands of years the wall, these images . . . will continue to tell Hindus that—Oh cowards! This was once your temple that was destroyed to build a mosque. Why do we ask for Ramjanmabhoomi? If it had been destroyed and razed to the ground completely but no they broke the temple and built the Babri structure but used the pillars of the old temple while doing so, pillars that have sculpted images of Hindu gods and goddesses. And after building the mosque at the right spot, they let Hindus build a platform adjacent to it. Why? So that they may continue to tease Hindus for thousands of years—that look here, here was a temple and if you don't believe it, look at the pillars and the rest. Which Hindu will tolerate this? And those who give us sala [expletive] the sermon of peace, they are cowards is fact. So unless you remove these signs of past bondage, Hindus have no right to call themselves independent and free.

[So] the fight for RJB is a fight for Hindu rashtra [nation]. Earlier, pre 1947, sadhus raised their voice for a Hindu *rashtra* [nation] in their capacity as individuals. Now we have become more organized.

Thus, Avaidyanath believed that sadhus became politically active because the RJB dispute provided an opportunity to raise issues that had been festering since India became independent—to declare India a Hindu nation, to have uniform laws for all religious communities, and to remove signs of Muslim rule from Hindu religious places of worship. Although Avaidyanath entered the political arena inadvertently after the death of his guru—whose parliamentary seat he won—he rose into prominence on the basis of the power, prestige, and wealth associated with his temple-hermitage complex. As a prominent sadhu and a prominent member of parliament of BJP, it seemed quite reasonable that VHP would pick him to head the Trust to build the Ram temple after the destruction of the mosque. However, as the next chapter will show, Avaidyanath's relationship with VHP, BJP, and RSS was not as simple, and he aggressively maintained his independence. Avaidyanath firmly believes that despite differences among sadhus, the RJB conflict united them, also because the VHP helped organize their independent voices into a unified, religiously powerful force or symbol to reckon with.

Vamdev Maharaj: A Commitment to Organize Hindus in the Face of Impending Muslim Dominance

Swami Vamdev Maharaj was among the most prominent sadhus involved with the RJB campaign when I interviewed him in 1993 and 1996. He died in 1998. Because of his poor health, his political activism was restricted to giving speeches at important religious forums, urging Hindus to rally behind the RJB issue. As a prominent resident of the Hindu pilgrimage town of Vrindavan—in the state of Uttar Pradesh and associated with Lord Krishna—he occupied a high status in the RJB Nyas, the Trust floated by VHP for construction of the Ram temple. His views on sadhus' unity and their political activism did not seem very different from the three sadhus discussed earlier. Yet there are subtleties that I wish to draw attention to. Our interview was interrupted by a phone call seeking instructions about a police case involving a murder—a more unsettling example of his continued engagement with worldly affairs, despite his alleged renunciation of the same. After putting down the phone he reverted to his reflective mode as a sadhu, explaining the deep seated reasons behind why sadhus like him rose as a

political force. The first important theme is that Hindus should organize themselves just as their enemies, the Muslims had done.

During my travels with other sadhus, we reached Delhi one cold evening in the evening of 1980. We camped there as I was not feeling well. I read in the newspapers there that in Bandra in Bombay, Muslim students from around the country had organized a conference. And there they had made a pledge to turn this country into an Islamic nation, break every idol in the country, and spread the true message of Khuda [Allah] throughout. A thought came to my mind, about this Muslim person and his family near our village. We used to respect them a lot. We used to call him *tau*, uncle. There was a lot of mutual love. I wondered why such a bitter talk would start in an atmosphere of love and affection. So I started paying close attention to these issues over the next four years, and listened to and studied the views of Muslim leaders. I reflected over the thoughts of Abul Kalam Azad, Shaukat Ali, Mohammad Ali, Maulana Mawdoodi and several other [Muslim] leaders, including the views of those who came to hold power after Independence. I became convinced that in this country the ruling power [Congress] and the Muslims were out to destroy our Hindu culture. And that the government had no interest in Hindu culture. And the Muslims, even after independence, continue to fight with Hindus, beat Hindus, and humiliate and insult them. . . . I started to find that the government always took sides, favored the Muslims. After more reflection, I found that the government does all this just for the sake of Muslim votes.

I decided that we should organize Hindus just as the Muslims had done with themselves. I started this work in 1984. Before that I never accepted any invitation to address events or meetings that had anything to do with politics or social issues. And starting from 1984 I started to spread my political views freely in religious gatherings and in events like yagyas [important Hindu religious rituals]. And slowly people started to enjoy listening to my views.

So my views spread far among sadhus. And during all this, VHP was already doing its own work [on the RJB issue]. Now VHP tried to involve me in their organization. For quite some time I did not feel necessary to join them. But after a lot of persuasion, I attended one of their meetings at Ahmedabad in 1986. When I saw that they too wanted to organize Hindus, I joined them. Once I joined them, I got involved in the work on Ramjanmabhoomi. I got attracted towards that issue, and I managed to organize sadhus from all over the country and turn their attention in this direction. So now all the great sadhus in this country feel that somehow we have to work for saving Hindu culture.

Vamdev propagated a relatively new method for rallying sadhus: urging them to pray collectively to achieve political ends. He believed it worked in the rise of religious nationalism.

I believe that if we [sadhus] pray collectively to God then this campaign will move forward. . . . When I find progressive and dynamic sadhus and mahatmas I express my views about this [collective prayer]. . . . In the Kumbh Mela [the main Hindu religious fair] in Allahabad in 1996, I expressed my views on collective prayer in front of all the sadhus collected there and led a one hour prayer where everyone participated.

The primary method of [political] activism that I advocate is that . . . we sadhus should try and reform the mindset of political leaders through praying as a collective. I did so through ritualistic prayers involving 60 sadhus between March 21 and March 21 in [the states of] Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Nepal and Assam. The public had difficulty in understanding the meaning and usefulness of this form of collective prayer. They fail to see—and I could explain to them if my health was better—that it is rare for corrupt minds to reform themselves on their own. Politicians with such minds will end up killing each other.

Vamdev's own mindset is revealed when he switched from expounding the efficacy of collective prayers to the deeper, but familiar, reasons behind why sadhus became politically active.

Essentially the discourse was about the tolerant Hindus *versus* the fanatical Muslims:

We believe that a communal person is one who resents and hates the worship traditions and sacred places of another community. Hindus never had this tendency. Jews came here first after the whole world tried to kill them. Parsees [Zoroastrians] also came here with their ways of worship and we did not trouble them and did not care. The trouble and conflicts start when we start hating each other's religions and ways of worshipping. And this was especially the case with Muslims. They kept fighting with us in order to perpetuate fear and dominate us. Even today they do not want to share the common nationalist sentiment of the common Indian. One of their leaders went to the extent of even saying that there are two things—identifying with the nation or identifying with Islam and Muslims, that you will to choose between the two, because those who choose Islam cannot be nationalists and those who choose nationalism cannot choose Muslims.

This feeling among many Muslims is not only dangerous for India but for countries throughout the world where they happen stay in. You look at the map: the Arab states, of course, were always there but now we see their influence spreading in countries like Burma, Thailand, etc. If they succeed they can attack from the East and dominate Asia. It will be very dangerous if Muslims were to get favored status and gain foothold in India and Burma. I believe this is communalism in the widest sense.

This deep anxiety of an impending Muslim dominance—their alleged organizational unity and their natural allegiance to religion over national interest—constitute the reasons why sadhus like Vamdev rallied behind the RJB campaign and took to political activism. According to Vamdev, sadhus' support in helping VHP or BJP come to power was secondary.

I [always] felt that there was a need for Hindus to get organized [just like the Muslims]. VHP also was thinking along the same lines so we joined hands. Now the question arose, who should we regard to be the ideal person or role model for this society. For that they seized upon the character of Lord Ram. And when they brought up Ram, the issue of Ramjanmabhoomi naturally came up. And when that came up, we brought up this issue among people in a very quick way. At that time, BJP came in as a supporter of that cause. . . . I am not associated with any political party as such. And whatever relationship I have

with BJP and VHP is that whenever they talk in favor of the RJB issue, then they have our support.

Acharya Dharmendra: Hindu Nationalism and a Call for Organizing Hindus

Based in the BJP stronghold city of Jaipur, Acharya Dharmendra belongs to *grihastha parampara* [householder tradition] of sadhus whose traditional role is teaching and giving religious discourses. He came to occupy this hereditary position after his father's death, and not because of a deep sense of *vairagya* or detachment from worldly responsibilities. In the 1990s he became the chairman of the central executive of the VHP and also the president of the VHP's Sant Samiti (committee of sadhus). As a fiery speaker Dharmendra was arrested, but bailed out, for giving strident ant-Muslim speeches.

Following his predecessors, Dharmendra was involved with traditional Hindu causes in a marginal capacity: anti cow campaigns; abolishing animal sacrifice; vegetarianism; upliftment of lower Hindu castes, and removing untouchability. Dharmendra links his views on the need for Hindu unity—and activism in that cause—to traditional concerns of many Hindu religious leaders whom he admires.

Ramanandi sadhus have always been concerned about social issues, and not simply about how to achieve salvation. . . . In fact there is a concept in Hindu religion that God lives among people [*janata janardan*], so if you want to realize God you must be actively involved in the welfare of people. So sadhus have always been vocal about organizing Hindu society. I admire [the sadhu] Samarth Ram Das who tried to do this in a very aggressive way. He said, we [sadhus] need to have devotion towards God and act as a powerful social and political force. He even gave us the dream of hoisting the Hindu flag on top of the Red Fort [the symbol of power in the capital, New Delhi].

My whole life has been dedicated to promoting Hindu causes and Hindu religion. I do not do anything else. I give religious discourses but I also participate in Hindu campaigns. I publish papers in our journals as well. I was associated with the Hindu Mahasabha party for a short time but I have in touch with the RSS since childhood days. I have supported all Hindu organizations and Hindu parties. Now that BJP is the only one around, I support it. . . . *We sadhus rose in the name of Hindu nationalism because Ram, whom we worship, and our love for our nation are linked.* Ram instilled in us the love for this nation. Lord Krishna was also born here in Bharat [Hindu term for India]. So our faith in our religion and our love for this nation are linked. We cannot separate our religion from our patriotism and devotion towards the nation. Among the many images of Ram, there is also his character as the most virtuous leader of this nation. And we keep that [nationalist] image in front of our eyes when we pray to Ram.

In addition to his inherent love for Ram and Hindu nationalism, Acharya Dharmendra echoes the theme of Muslim intolerance, as one of the underlying reasons why Hindus, including sadhus, rose to action when the RJB conflict erupted:

Unlike Hinduism, Islam says that follow only Mohammed and those who do not follow him are infidels, no matter how noble their characters might be. Great souls and great thinkers from other religions according to them are all infidels who ought to be robbed and killed. And they even consider it fine to abduct women infidels and keep them in their houses. . . . The seeds of hatred are there in Koran itself. Those are shameful. They do not allow any reformers to change things. . . . Our [great sadhu] Vivekanand went to America and the West and spoke about Hindu religion. If he had gone to any Arab country they would not have allowed him to speak. They would have killed him or stoned him. So this intolerance and conservative attitude is a gift of Islam.

On the other hand in [the Hindu religious text] Gita, God says that He is present in everything that you see in this creation. So the [Hindu] God is present in the mosque and the church also. So why this insistence to remove a temple in order to build a mosque? The real point is that you [the Muslims] destroyed one place of worship [where God was present] in order to build another one. They destroyed the soul of this nation and all this was a big conspiracy to humiliate us. Injustice in the name of religion can never be justified and is morally wrong. What we sadhus campaigned for was a Hindu nation, and by that we mean a tolerant society. We do not want to bring about a society like many Arab countries which do not allow people to keep books of religion other than Islam. That is not possible in India. We will have Koran too and Bible also. The best example of Hindu tolerance is how we treated Parsees [Zoroastrians] who came to India about a thousand years ago. They assimilated and fought for India's Independence and became prominent citizens. We even made the wife of a Parsee as our Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi]. The first mosque in India was built by Hindu kings. The first church in India was built by Hindu kings. Jaipur was a Hindu state and the Hindu kings settled all the Muslims in this city. Hindus, by nature and by inherited traditions, are religious and tolerant.

But tolerance does not mean that we do not take pride in our own religion. It was [the sadhu] Vivekanand who gave us the mantra that *say it with pride that you are a Hindu*.

That mantra was indeed the cry that reverberated throughout the RJB campaign and that rallied sadhus like Acharya Dharmendra as well as lay Hindus to a strident form of political activism around the RJB issue. In a quick turnaround Acharya Dharmendra contextualizes and justifies the rise of political activism of sadhus in very general terms by arguing that all Hindu religious epics were based on political struggles:

What is Ramayana [the epic involving Ram], it is the preeminent book of Hindu politics. If you remove the political struggle over the three kingdoms in the story, including Ayodhya and Sri Lanka [the abode of Ram's enemy, Ravana], there is nothing left in

Ramayana. The same is true with Mahabharat [the epic based on Lord Krishna]. If you take away the political battles in the kingdoms of Mathura and Magadh and Hastinapur, there is nothing left of the story of Mahabharat. So all our religious texts are based on politics and what ideal politics ought to be like. We sadhus are aware of that and do not try to stay away from politics. There have been so many atrocities against Hindu culture and Hindu society is on such a decline that we have now come out openly to give direction. Our activism has come from our inherited traditions.

[Also] the more Congress and the Left parties opposed us and the BJP, the more active we became. If all of us had sat down to negotiate, things would have been different. If Congress had accepted our demands for building only the three temples [at Ayodhya, Mathura, and Benaras] everything would have died down. But instead it has only helped BJP mobilize Hindu votes.

Aside from the familiar rhetoric about unifying the tolerant Hindus against Muslim intolerance, Acharya Dharmendra's discourse reveals a normative point—that sadhus should become politically active because that was their historic role as well as their duty as laid out in the Hindu religious epics. According to him and many other strident sadhus, the RJB campaign and the obstinate opposition of the Congress party provided an opportunity to live up to their self-image as protectors of Hindu society, and added fuel to the fire.

Swami Chinmayanand Saraswati: Righteousness, Divine Intervention, and Hindu Culture as Comparative Advantage

When I interviewed Swami Chinmayanand in 1993 and 1996, he was the BJP member of parliament from the Badayun district of UP, the state where the disputed RJB structure was located. Although he was a strident supporter of Hindu nationalism and the RJB campaign, he justifies the activism of sadhus like himself in a way that distinguishes him from other Type I sadhus discussed so far. In fact by equating the rise of sadhus' with God's will, he tempers what was otherwise a relatively violent campaign. His discourse on sadhus' activism begins, however, with a general critique of the idea that sadhus should not be involved in politics in the first place.

Sadhus, as sadhus, are influenced by worldly or public life; instead they attempt to change it. Look, the idea of sanyas (or the vow of renunciation that sadhus take up) as giving up worldly pursuits was never intended in the meaning of sanyas.

And up to now, those religious figures who have really made a significant contribution are those who took to sanyas straight after childhood, whether it be Vivekanand, Ramtirth, Acharya Shankara, Ramanaju, Dayanand, or Maharshi Aurobindo, these were

not exhausted people, but sadhus with the energy and capital of life who stepped in the world to change it [not renounce it].

[Historically] sadhus have always stood out on the streets to challenge an illegitimate government. They have always tried to resolve social and class conflicts, and not simply to look after their own salvation. They have been very active in the Independence movement and in political campaigns for the welfare of farmers, like the sadhu Siaram Sharan Das. Even Gandhi tried to copy sadhus like him.

According to Chinmayanand, his association with VHP and BJP—and even with the anti-Congress and socialist leader Jai Prakash Narayan in mid ‘70s—was motivated not by attraction towards a right-wing ideology but by an urge to infuse politics with righteousness and a concern for saving Hindu culture. *He believes that India’s “comparative advantage” is its cultural heritage and spirituality, not technology and science, and sadhus like him look for ways to aggressively promote cultural nationalism—whenever the opportunity arises—because the world is hungry for those things.* And that opportunity, according to Chinmayanand, opened up when BJP started emerging as a political force and when the RJB campaign started. But, in an about-face, Chinmayanand believes it was a gift of God that animated sadhus like him, and not BJP or a specific intention on their part, to influence politics:

There was a moment on 6th December 1992 when I was in Ayodhya [when the mosque was destroyed]. I too had given the assurance before the Allahabad High Court . . . I will make sure that no harm comes to the structure [the mosque]. But when the kar sevaks [VHP and other volunteers] climbed the structure in front of me, and started to break it, then this was a question of dilemma for me. At that time the politician and the saint in me were standing in front of each other. The word I had given as a saint seemed to be breaking. A politician’s word and assurances keep changing from time to time. But there is sanctity to a sadhu’s word and promise. And he considers keeping that promise as a matter of life and death. The same dilemma was in front of me, that all this was happening in front of me and I was unable to do anything. . . . But then a sort of divine inspiration came to me from within, that what was happening was beyond my control and that I was not at fault. Because I had no such intention or objective. The [voice told me that the] assurance I had given was genuine, from the heart and even today I did not wish things to happen the way they were unfolding and that I really was sad about the events. That what was happening was not what I intended but was in accordance with God’s will. [I was being told] that whenever things happen which are beyond the control of individuals or institutions, then one must accept that it is because of divine intervention and God’s will. So this inspiration from within helped me during this time of dilemma when I felt the conflict between a sadhu and a politician. . . . [M]y entire life has been based on such divine inspirations.

No one was taking responsibility in the parliament. Such a big event had taken place and every one was trying to shield and distance themselves from it. Even then, my inner divine voice had told me not to fear about consequences and to move ahead and assume the appropriate responsibility for what had happened. So I went ahead and had said that whatever had happened, the BJP, the VHP, the RSS, the Bajrang Dal was not responsible for it. “We” were responsible for it, for it was we sadhus who had called the kar sevaks [the volunteers]. *It was we sadhus who had announced that kar seva [volunteer service] would be performed there. It was the sadhus who had said again and again that this structure in the Ramjanmabhoomi was built by foreigners. So whatever happened as a result, we sadhus were responsible for it.* [Emphasis mine]. And therefore we are ready to accept whatever punishment that Government or society considers right.

Aside from divine inspirations that may have led sadhus like him to unite around the RJB campaign, Chinmayanand attributes the rise of sadhus’ activism to the significance of Lord Ram among different ascetic communities:

Some worship the name of Ram, some worship the idol of Ram, some worship the dhaam [abode] of Ram, some worship the Katha [epic story] of Ram, and some worship the character of Ram. But in the end all these different ways become united and one in Ram. . . . We sadhus feel that it is only through Ram that we can unite the Hindu society. Because, as the Ram story goes, he is close to and united with Sabri, Nishad, Sugreev, Hanuman, the sages Vishwamitra and Vashishtha [characters in the Ram epic spanning all social castes and classes]. . . . Even the Muslim poet-saint Rahim saw Ram in everything in Ayodhya.

But Rahim and Raskhan, for Chinmayanand, seemed to be exceptions, for soon after he slipped into a familiar discourse on Muslim intolerance that irritated and energized sadhus and the Hindu community.

Look at the [the 16th century] liberal Muslim poet Raskhan who identified with the soil of India, but now you have people like Muslim leader Bukhari [with ancestral association with Iraq]. He says that our ancestors came from Bukhara in Iraq, and he has no affection for India despite the fact that he has lived here in India all his life. Why do Muslims feel that we created problems for them even after Independence [when Pakistan was created]? Why do they suddenly start admiring what Babar did [meaning, destroying the RJB temple]. This is a perversion that we sadhus react against. We sadhus have to end that way of thinking after Independence [and partition from Pakistan].

Equating Muslims with demons, Chinmayanand compares sadhus’ political activism in 20th century with their role in Ram’s story in the religious epic Ramayana. The king Janak, Ram’s father, in the story symbolizes government and politicians.

Whenever a demon like Ravana [the evil character in the epic Ramayana] emerges, it is not a king Janak who blocks his path. It is a sadhu like Vishwamitra who appears on the

scene and inspires people to defeat the demon. Sadhus in our ancient texts, like Chanakya, Vishwamitra, Sandeepa, and Parshuram, are the ones who always rose to shape politics and provide the right direction to society. Even in modern times, whether it was Dayanand Saraswati, Ramanna Maharshi, or Aurobindo, it was sadhus who emerged to destroy demonic forces. . . . We sadhus do not believe that we only have to build temples and do spiritual meditation. We sadhus believe in fighting to resolve social conflicts.

Three themes stand out in Chinmayanand's discourse on sadhus' political activism, the surge in Hindu nationalism, and the rise of BJP. First, Chinmayanand believes, like many Type I sadhus, that sadhus have always come out in times of social crisis, as it was in the case of the RJB conflict. What is implied in his comments is that the symbol and image of a sadhu as the righteous one—and as someone who is otherwise a relative recluse—makes Hindus rally around their call to action. Given sadhus' identity as religious actors, he believes that they have a relatively greater ability to figure out God's will and to therefore mobilize people around a virtuous cause. In addition, Chinmayanand—speaking in the language of a typical economist—thinks that culture is India's comparative advantage and sadhus are the its natural inheritors and promoters, a fact they demonstrated through their aggressive activism in engendering cultural nationalism during the early 90's. Finally, Chinmayanand believes that sadhus of all stripes rallied around the symbol of Ram because Ram has a deep mystical and a symbolic significance that transcends sectarian and ideological differences among sadhus.

Swami Sakshiji Maharaj: Rise because of Electioneering Compulsions

When I interviewed Sakshiji Maharaj in 1993, he was a BJP member of parliament from Mathura, considered to be a holy city by many Hindus. Coincidentally, it also is the site of an old festering dispute like the temple-mosque conflict in Ayodhya.

Sakshiji Maharaj's account of the rise of Hindutva contains only one new element, not mentioned by any other sadhu. His claims add to the richness of the political story during the early 80's, and for that reason only they need to be taken note of.

When we [from the BJP] chose Ayodhya for our political campaign, the M.P. [member of parliament] from Ayodhya was from the Communist party. We felt that we are fighting in this Ramjanmabhoomi campaign, but the people from Ayodhya do not like us and voted a Communist M.P. instead. This was really bothering us. We felt that the M.P. from Ayodhya ought to be from the party [the BJP] which had taken up the cause of building the temple in Ayodhya. And since we were talking about a similar campaign in

Mathura and Kashi [sites of disputed structures similar to the one at Ayodhya], we felt we should have BJP M.P.s from those constituencies also. So we put up Vinay Katiyar from the Bajrang Dal [the militant youth wing of VHP] and ex-deputy chairman of VHP, Shishan Dikshitji from Kashi. I had to sacrifice my prestigious earlier seat and fight elections from Mathura.²²⁴ They begged me to do so for it would help organize Hindus. So I and Katiyar joined the battle and that is how things happened.

Although it is difficult to assess the relative contribution of electioneering to the selection of Ayodhya as the battleground, one thing is for sure: given the organizational strength and vitriolic reputation of Bajrang Dal, it is not unlikely that its leader Vinay Katiyar may have been instrumental in creating an atmosphere conducive to the rise of fundamentalist-like forces in the Hindu and Muslim communities. At the same time, the fact that RJB campaign was taken up by BJP as early, or as late, during its Palampur session in 1989, the two factors have reinforced one another in the re-emergence of 20th century Hindutva that started with the RSS in 1925.

Adityanath Yogi: A Campaign Against Muslims – Using Violence

I interviewed Adityanath Yogi in 2008. He is a disciple of Mahant Avidyanath—discussed earlier—and the youngest of the few sadhus (born in 1972) in the parliament today. He was elected with a landslide margin on the BJP ticket in 2004, a seat he won after Avidyanath retired from the prestigious Gorakhpur constituency, a bastion of Hindu nationalism.

Adityanath's fame rests on his extremely strident views and activism with anything to do with promoting Hindu causes. He is seen as the successor abbot or head priest of the immensely wealthy Gorakhpur temple-hermitage complex that is now managed by Mahant Avidyanath. He therefore commands a tremendous clout in the large Indian states of UP and Bihar and in neighboring Nepal, where Lord Gorakhnath is very popular.

He is regarded as the most right-wing face of the BJP, and is the founder of a radical Hindu group known as Hindu Yuva Vahini [Hindu Youth Vehicle]. In January 2007, he was charged with destroying a Muslim tomb and flouting police curfew orders after his organization started a riot during a Muslim religious ritual in which several train coaches were burnt down. While

²²⁴ In 1998, Sakshiji Maharaj had won the (Lok Sabha) parliamentary elections on the BJP ticket from Farrukhabad in the State of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). Ironically—and as a testimony to his individualistic nature—he left the BJP in 1999 to join BJP's arch rival, the Samajwadi Party in U.P. After court cases were filed against him alleging sexual exploitation, BJP is said to have expelled him and denied an election ticket.

placing Adityanath in 14 days custody, the District Magistrate Hari Om said, “We do not want to give the impression that certain people can hold the city at ransom and do whatever they wish.”²²⁵

Besides being aggressively active in re-converting low-caste converts of Christianity and Islam back into Hinduism—a strategy to organize Hindus against minorities—Adityanath plays a prominent role in organizations that promote traditional Hindu causes, such as cow protection or anti cow slaughter campaigns. But Adityanath’s biggest claim to fame is his use of violent strong-arm methods, including death threats, to silence his political opponents. Referring to the RJB conflict at a public meeting in the Maniram Assembly constituency in UP, for example, Adityanath declared:

The temple is Ram and whoever opposes it is branded Ravana [the king in the religious epic *Ramayana*, who symbolizes evil] by the people. A number of Ranas have already been eliminated and if someone else tries to don the mantle, he too will face the same fate.²²⁶

Adityanath, in his habitual way of covering his tracks, dons the identity of an ecstatic holy man while talking about sadhus’ strident political activism in the ‘90s:

The Ramjanmabhoomi campaign was not a political campaign. In a way it was a cultural revolution and a campaign for national awakening. . . . We sadhus were always linked to that cause and are still linked with it in a euphoric way. . . . Whenever national pride is at stake, we sadhus have risen to fight for it.

Lurking in the background are Adityanath’s extreme views against Muslims. He equates what many Muslim rulers did in the medieval period in India with 20th century Islamic terrorists. He firmly believes that Muslims in India are inspired by Pakistan, a country whose foundational values include terrorism. And in order to prevent Muslims from creating trouble in India—as they did, according to him, during the RJB conflict—sadhus rose when government failed. It is interesting to note Adityanath’s discourse and beliefs as compared to historical facts.

See, sadhus and Hindus fought 76 campaigns [since RJB mosque was built in 1528] and four lakhs [400, 000] Hindus died in them.²²⁷ By 1935 the matter was in the favor of

²²⁵ The author, Shahira Naim, further states: “Responding to the arrest of the Yogi, his supporters set ablaze state roadway buses in virtually every district of Gorakhpur, blocked the main Gorakhpur-Varanasi Highway and even tried to set afire a passenger train near Gorakhpur.” See Shahira Naim, “Gorakhpur: DM, SSP removed”, Chandigarh: The Tribune, January 30, 2007.

²²⁶ Sharad Gupta, “Group war peaks in Uttar Pradesh”, New Delhi: Indian Express, September 28, 1999.

²²⁷ Based on my interviews the number range from 76 to hundreds, and even thousands.

Hindus and the British did not object to it.²²⁸ In 1949 the idol of Ram appeared inside.²²⁹ We sadhus kept the agitation alive.²³⁰ The present government tried to remove Ram's idol but because of our and people's opposition they did not dare to go ahead with their plans. And when the locks to the RJB temple were opened in 1986, we started the campaign and people responded. We had never been quiet on this issue and we gave a befitting and a just reply to the government and the Muslims. . . . If, after the 1947 partition, India was recognized as a Hindu nation then we would not have had a problem with Muslim terrorists and we sadhus would not have taken up nationalist causes. . . . If you read the ancient texts sadhus have always been linked with democracy and we do not believe in fundamentalism. . . . What is happening now in India is a war against Hindu culture and civilization and Hindu sentiments and that is what makes us sadhus rebel. . . . All in the name of secularism and minority rights. Sadhus have a unique role in making people, especially the youth, realize about the dangers we face from [Muslim] terrorists and from attacks on Hindu sentiments by government, westernization and TV. It is like a sweet poison that we sadhus feel will destroy us.

It is relatively easy to step inside the mind of the sadhu Adityayanath given his diatribe against Muslims and his belief in dealing with alleged enemies of Hindu culture in a violent way. It is not clear, however, whether his non-pacific nature is anchored in ignorance of historical facts or his penchant for believing that sadhus have always risen to solve the root cause of all problems facing modern India—westernization, and appeasement of minorities, especially Muslims. As the following interview will show, Adityanath pales in comparison to sadhavi Rithambara, whose strident anti-Muslim speeches were so popular, and effective, that they were routinely played through cassettes in buses and public places throughout the RJB campaign.

The sadhu **Jagdish Muni's** dislike of Muslims is more nuanced and specific and becomes part of his account of the rise of Hindutva forces in the RJB campaign:

We sadhus tried to approach the Muslim clerics and leaders many times to resolve the dispute peacefully. But they were very obstinate and did not want to give in at all. And then when the Congress started taking their side, the whole Hindutva campaign exploded. There was no plan to destroy the disputed mosque structure.

²²⁸ As a matter of historical fact recorded in government archives, the British imposed a collective fine on Ayodhya's residents when the disputed RJB structure was partially damaged in 1935.

²²⁹ As a matter of fact, recorded also in government archives, six individuals, including the sadhu Paramhans interviewed earlier, sneaked into the disputed structure on the night of December 23rd, 1949 and placed an idol of Lord Ram inside. But believers continue to talk in terms of a divine appearance.

²³⁰ As indicated earlier in the interview with the sadhu Paramhans, one of the main litigants from the Hindu side, the dispute was being handled in a routine, non-agitational way from 1950 to the mid-1980's,

Sadhavi Rithambara: A Strident Call to Action Against Congress & Muslims for RJB

Almost unknown to people and the media before the RJB conflict erupted, the Punjab-born sadhavi Rithambara played a very important role in the so-called Hindu awakening through powerfully delivered speeches that drew upon Indian history, humor, crude abuses, facts and fiction. Coming from a pleasant looking young woman, who carried the mystique of being unattainable because of her status as a sadhavi and an avowed celibate, her speeches acquired a special seductive significance.

In a surprising contrast to her strident speeches, she appears as a meek, distanced, and disinterested ascetic in my interviews with her in 1993 and 2008. I reproduce excerpts from her best-selling cassette, based on a speech she delivered in 1991. Although lengthy, these quotes best illustrate the deep emotions of the strident sadhu urging the somewhat reluctant Hindus to wage a war against the traitors such as Congress and the Muslims. Rithambara's long call to action—laced with cultural references and delivered in a colloquial way—draws the curtain on the rise of sadhu-led Hindu nationalism. While the English translation appears rhetorically less powerful than the original Hindi version, I am reproducing the long speech that was often replayed in buses and public places, making Hindu activists go into frenzy.

Hail Mother India, Har Har Mahadev!!!²³¹ Speak up, victory to Ramjanmabhoomi, victory to Krishnajanmabhoomi, victory to Kashi Vishwanath.²³²

Don't let any blame come to the blood you may have to spill, don't let your mothers say that their brave sons did not rise to the cause. We have accepted the challenge of Ramjanmabhoomi and we are very close to the final stages of the battle. Now is the time when our patience, devotion, and resolve will be tested. . . . You must be thinking why we sadhus, who were engrossed in religious verses and private meditation, have started to speak in this new language. The simple reason is we have been betrayed by [Congress] politics for 44 years. And that is why Indian sadhus have left their temples and taken to the streets. Not only have we waited for 44 years for our Ramjanmabhoomi temple, Hindus are being beaten in Kashmir and Punjab. With so much Hindu blood spilt, we sadhus have descended on the battle field out of desperation. In [the religious epic] Ramayana, sadhu Vishwamitra did the same thing. And you have to rise and identify yourself as Ram and [his brother] Lakshman did in Ramayana. We will place in your hands magical weapons [of Lord Indra] which you must use to protect our culture.

²³¹ Mahadeva stands for the Lord Shiva in his destructive form, and 'Har Har Mahadev' is a battle cry raised by Shiva's army before charging into the war against the demons.

²³² These are the three major temples that were replaced by mosques by Muslim rulers during the medieval times. Although many more temples were destroyed, these are associated with the three preeminent deities in the Hindu tradition, Ram, Krishna, and Shiv, and hence their significance.

We sadhus have come to bless you in this war. We have come to awaken self pride in you. Those very same people born with the blood of Mother India in them [the Muslims and politicians opposed to the Ram temple], are acting as traitors. They are in a great delusion if they think that Muslim emperors enslaved India for hundreds of years because Hindus are impotent, cowards, and weak. From the 10th century ruler Mahmud Ghazni to 20th century Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Muslims have been scheming and hatching conspiracies. But we are the descendent of those heroic kings and Hindu martyrs who have foiled their attempts to erase our culture and religion. How can we forget Maharana Pratap Singh [the 16th Hindu warrior king] who kicked out and defeated Aurangzeb [the last Mughal emperor]? How can we forget our many other ancestors who made Muslim rulers lick the dirt, and our Hari Singh Lalua who chased them out from Kabul to Kandahar? We are the children of such valiant Hindus. So we will give a befitting reply if anyone tries to make this country into an Islamic state or divides it. [In modern Indian history] this division happened not because of Muslims or Christians, but because of the power hungry [Congress] politicians acting like pimps. The real traitors are from within.

These traitors cannot see what 700 million can see and in whose hearts Ram resides. Like they say that the owl cannot see the sun, so these sons of owls cannot see the land of Ram [Ayodhya] whose lineage we trace to the sun God. Now we are being asked to show the proof of Ram. The proof when he was ever born. You fools, when 700 million Hindus, when they meet each other they usually greet each other with words 'Jai Ramji Ki'. They strike up a relationship by using the word Ram. When farmers in the village and people get tired after a hard day's work, or when they are in misery, they say 'Haay Ram' to relieve themselves. They don't say 'Haay V. P. Singh' or 'Haay Mulayam Singh Yadav' [the two most prominent anti-BJP Hindu politicians from UP where Ayodhya is located]. When Hindus die, people chant Ram's name in the funeral procession. So our lives begin with Ram and ends with Ram. Do you still want the proof about Ram? This country belongs to the king of Ayodhya, Ram. These traitors today are going through intellectual acrobatics regarding our belief in Ram. We are being told that not Ram, but [these anti Ram temple Hindu politicians] Chandrashekhar and Mulayam Singh Yadav are the fathers of our nation. They are asking us to change the site where we want to build the Ram temple. Ram is the father of our nation. Bastards, will they agree to change their fathers for new fathers? All they want is the ready made vote of Muslims as a bloc.

Now the children of Mother India have woken up and woken up to the fact that we have waited 44 years to liberate our Ram. And we know what these [Congress] politicians have done over the past 44 years. They gave in to [the politician] Lal Denga who threatened with his revolver unless his demands to not secede from India were met. . . . We need patriots who will riddle such traitors with bullets . . . we need people like Patel and Subhash [legendary militant nationalists during the Independence movement]. We cannot understand these Muslims who identify themselves with such vicious [Muslim] invaders such as Babur and Aurangzeb. Gandhi also tried to mend Hindu Muslim relations by saying we are all brothers. But it did not work. We do not object to the sounds of azaans [call to Muslim prayers] blared through loudspeakers when Hindus are

praying, but they object to the sounds of our bells in our temples. Communal riots between Muslims and Hindus only take place where Muslims are in a majority. Why? Why is it that no riots take place Muharram [a Muslim ritual procession] but they happen during Hindu processions, that is because they throw stones at us and we don't. These Muslims believe that if they die in killing the infidel Hindus in these riots they will go straight to heaven. This is written in the Koran. Whereas Hindus squirm even when an ant comes under their feet. Koran asks its believers to skin the non-believers and turn those skins into some other skins [reference to conversion that creates ripples in the crowd]. There is a difference between earth and the sky between these two cultures. . . . We [tolerant] Hindus gave up our national anthem and changed our national flag to accommodate Muslim sentiments. We dismembered our Motherland and let them create Pakistan. And now we are being called fundamentalists. They think we sadhus want to be in positions of political power. We have no such interest, and yet we are called fundamentalists. We just want Ram, we want our Ramjanmabhoomi.

Religious fundamentalists are those who value their religion over and above national interests. For us religion is a personal matter and national interest is what we value and take pride in. They kill, and there is hardly a murmur; we sigh and we become blamed as criminals. Today, the anti-Hinudtva politicians like Mulayam Singh say sadhus and people with VHP are all meat eaters and alcoholics, that we do not have the moral right to build a temple for Ram. We say yes we are alcoholics, we are intoxicated, and we are drunk and intoxicated with our devotion for Ram.

But be prepared to fight. If they stop us from building the temple, go and fight. Let there be violence, let blood flow. These mosque supporters are like dogs with tails that will never become straight. So there is no point trying to do that and talk with them. There is no point turning the other cheek for they slap on that as well. Let us fight, let blood flow. And all you rich Hindus, open your coffers and give us the money so we can fight well. Don't be afraid of dying, because remember the martyr Bhagat Singh who was hanged by the British dogs. Remember when her mother was asked why she was crying, she said was feeling bad why she could not give birth to another brave one like Bhagat Singh, she felt the more martyrs the better. You have to fight this government which has done nothing in 44 years. We are still a terribly poor country. You have forgotten your strength and the powerful blood that runs through your arms, and that is why an impotent party [like Congress] has been able to rule you for so long. We sadhus have come forward to wake you up from your slumber. Break down barriers of caste and language and region. Unite, and we sadhus will give you your Ramjanmabhoomi temple.

Rithambara's speech, followed by my interviews with her in 1993 and 2008, are good examples of the political significance of sadhus. During one period she incites "just" violence and asks people to throw out the government; at another time during my interviews later, she withdraws into her ascetic cocoon to talk only about non-political issues and morality. Through conversations with sadhus in the next section, I explain this bipolarity, or the rise and splintering of sadhus' political activism.

While it is entirely true that the VHP provided a platform for most strident sadhus to lead their agitation, the same cannot be said for those like Uma Bharati, Mahant Avidyanath, Chinmayanand, and Sakshiji Maharaj—sadhus who were on the BJP ticket in the parliament even before the RJB Trust was ever created. The RJB conflict—that burst on the political scene after the locks around the disputed structure was opened in 1986—raised recurrent strident themes, and provided sadhus an opportunity to address simmering discontent and historical wrongs, and reform unjust practices.

The image sadhus hold of themselves—as inheritors and custodians of Hindu culture and religion—makes it easy for them to come out of their ascetic cocoon—as gods do in the Hindu religious phenomenon called avatars whenever evil forces converge to remind them of past injustices and present threats to Hindu culture and nation. I illustrate these through the table below.

Who is to blame?	Historical Wrongs	Current Failings
Congress	Appeasement of Muslims	Special rights and privileges for minorities, especially Muslims
Muslims	Invasion and Destruction of Hindu India	Refusal to give up RJB, even though it has no political/religious significance
Hindus	Historical inaction against Muslim domination	Inability to organize

This section has therefore shown that even though the sadhus came to the RJB cause based on different motivations, they shared a deeply held view on the cause of RJB. Given this shared passion, outside political events summarized in Chapter IV helped galvanize them into a cohesive group for the cause of RJB. However, as the next section will show, once the mosque was destroyed and outside events were less conducive, the internal division among sadhus and inherent independence of sadhus as sadhus contributed to their splintering.

PART II: THE SPLINTERING: OUTSIDE COUNTERFORCES, DIVERSITY AMONG SADHUS, AND THE COMMON DEMOLISHER WITHIN

The previous section showed why certain prominent sadhus became politically unified, and how they invoked Hindu nationalism. This section focuses on the sadhus' perspectives towards the unraveling of that unity—particularly with regard to the RJB temple-mosque issue—and the decline of religious nationalism as a mobilizing force. Three factors at three levels may explain the splintering that occurred: (i) Level 1: sadhus' differing views on the role of *outside* institutions (including political parties); (ii) Level 2: the *diversity among* sadhus on key issues, such as secularism as state policy and religious nationalism; and (iii) Level 3: the *commonality within* sadhus across different types as fiercely independent individuals.

Level 1: The Movers on the Splintering: The Role of Outside Institutions & Forces

The previous chapter recounted how the courts failed to resolve the RJB conflict after the destruction of the mosque. However, this fact should not be considered as the decisive factor that explains the disenchantment of sadhus—and the subsequent splintering of their unity. The matter had been languishing in the courts for about 50 years before 1992, and Hindu and Muslim representatives had been filing papers and litigating patiently, and yet passions flared up leading to the destruction of the mosque. So it is important to look not at the courts but other outside institutions—such as failings of key political parties—for an account of why the passions subsided after 1992.

Uma Bharati: The Failings of BJP – Failure to Adhere to Old Ideology

Let us consider the case of the BJP parliamentarian **Uma Bharati** blaming BJP itself.

After rising to the highest rank in her political career by winning the 2003 Madhya Pradesh Assembly elections with an overwhelming majority, Uma Bharati became the country's first woman sadhavi chief minister.

Widely regarded as “wildly eccentric”, a euphemism to describe her independent and uncompromising nature, she caused some embarrassment within BJP circles by her alleged

“association” (as a celibate sadhavi) with a celibate RSS pracharak.²³³ More controversies were to follow when she defied court orders and raised the national flag at the Idgah Maidan [field] identified with Muslims in Hubli, an act that landed her in jail. Finally, her public outrage on TV at the senior-most BJP leaders broke the proverbial camel’s back.²³⁴ She resigned from BJP in August 2004. Subsequently, she formed her own political party, the Bhartiya Jan Shakti [BJS], and in contrast to the euphoria she used to create earlier, her “yartra” [a march modeled after a religious pilgrimage] from Bhopal to Ayodhya failed to generate much public support. Looking back, the following is *her* account of the splintering. In an interesting contrast to her 1993 statement, in which she swore by the BJP, Uma Bharati had this to say in 2008 about her changed priorities, blaming BJP itself for why sadhus like her distanced herself:

The Bhartiya Jan Shakti party [or BJS] that I have formed has emerged out of my experiences in BJP. I subscribe to the old BJP ideology [meaning RSS’s strident Hindutva ideology] which the BJP seems to have distanced from lately. Even though it had to make certain compromises because of its electoral alliances with other parties, it should have held on to its core ideology [of pure Hindutva]. For instance take the issue of infiltration in India from the northeast. The northeastern states, including Bihar and Bengal, are very disturbed because the influx [of Muslims] from Bangladesh. And then there are secessionist and separatist movements in the northeast which are a threat to the integrity of an indivisible India [Akhand Bharat, as emphasized by RSS and Jan Sangh, BJP’s predecessor]. Surprisingly it was not BJP but Mamta Banerji [of the Trinamool faction of the Congress] and Chandrababu Naidu [of the Telugu Desam Party and CM of Andhra Pradesh] party who were the leading voices against infiltration of [Muslims, terrorists, and Maoists] in West Bengal and elsewhere in India. I can understand BJP not moving fast enough unilaterally on the RJB issue [because courts are involved] but it should have been very active on the issue of foreign infiltration. Not doing so has hurt the interest of the nation.

While we are putting more emphasis on issues like unemployment, corruption, and infiltration of foreigners [Muslims and Muslim terrorists] we will work with BJP

²³³ In addition, Uma Bharati was supposed to have created discomfort within BJP when she refused to align herself with some Opposition leaders in Congress for short-term gains (ironically, a common practice avowed political enemies), and her drive to root out corruption in certain BJP controlled government agencies.

²³⁴ In full gaze of TV cameras, Uma Bharati walked out of a meeting as the most senior leaders looked on, including L. K. Advani and A. B. Vajpayee. Having been expelled as the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, she challenged the leaders to take disciplinary actions against her. She also was unequivocal at this meeting that Advani and Vajpayee were being guided by BJP office bearers (like Arun Shourie) who had, unlike her, never had never run and won an election. She accused these non-elected individuals of briefing the media off the record to tarnish the reputation of leaders like her.

whenever they take up liberating the temples in Ayodhya, Benaras, and Mathura. In fact we will support any political party that takes up those temple issues *but we will not directly participate in political activism [emphasis mine]*. We may also support VHP on this issue because, after all, both BJP and VHP, are wings of the RSS, although we are not a wing of the RSS now. I agree 100% with RSS at an ideological level but I do not agree with VHP's Bajrang Dal because their members create a lot of trouble and violence. If I want to consult with RSS leaders I do, but I am not bound by their advice because I am independent and I have an independent mind.

She dismisses outright the idea that sadhus opposed to the VHP or to the sadhu-led RJB movement had any role to play in the splintering and her relative political quietism:

I do not want to talk about third grade people like Baba Lal Das [the priest of the RJB temple discussed later]. Swaroopanand is a Congressi Shankaracharya [discussed later] and I also do not want to say anything about Agnivesh [also discussed later]. See differences in ideas have always been there among Hindus and sadhus. Had there been no differences Mahmood Ghazni could not have invaded India and Akbar could not have ruled India. There is not much significance to all this.

The journalist Venkitesh Ramakrishnan describes internal squabbling within BJP—leading to Uma Bharati's expulsion and the relative demise of the Hindutva campaign—in the following terms:

The recent controversy [between the sadhavi BJP MP Uma Bharati and BJP leadership] began with a letter written by Uma Bharati to K.S. Sudarshan, the Sarsanghchalak [Chief] of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), complaining that Suresh Soni, who is in charge of coordinating between the BJP and the RSS, had a “gross prejudice” against her and was scuttling her chances of returning to Madhya Pradesh politics. The four-page letter, leaked to selected sections of the media, also contained allegations against the BJP general secretary and [BJP] vice-president M. Venkaiah Naidu.

Uma Bharati wants to get back the Chief Minister's chair, which she resigned in 2004 when she was charge-sheeted by a court in Hubli in Karnataka in a riot case registered in 1994. At the time of her resignation, Uma Bharati and the Sangh Parivar [RSS/BJP/VHP combine] leaders thought that she could emerge as a powerful national leader capable of taking over the mantle from Advani and Vajpayee. She even launched a nationwide tiranga yatra [nationalist procession] to assert her credentials as an emerging national leader.

But the inner-party moves unleashed against Uma Bharati by many second-rung [BJP] leaders at that time and her own variable personal temperament prevented her from achieving these goals. But, as events in the past one-year have proved, the fiery *sanyasin*

is not ready to concede defeat. And the BJP-Sangh Parivar leadership is not able to put up with her hurry.²³⁵

In my interview Uma Bharati justified her distancing from a weak BJP by declaring, “I am trying to form a third force to keep the Congress away.” *Interestingly, the Ramjanmabhoomi conflict was not mentioned.*

Mahant A vaidyanath: The Failings of VHP & RSS as Dominating & Divisive Forces

By 2008, **Mahant A vaidyanath**, Uma Bharati’s colleague in the parliament and the head of the RJB Trust, echoes her by insisting that VHP and RSS had become too dominating for the independent-minded sadhus like him. His comments must be seen in the context of his 1993 views when he had expressed his unwavering faith in the unity among sadhus on the general issue of Hindu nationalism. To recall,

There are bound to be differences in opinion among average Hindus, but that is not the case in the sadhu community. We have our differences in our different traditions of worship, but we agree in our broader thinking and that common framework has to do with our emphasis on nationalism and Hindu-ness or Hindutva. *You might know that at this time heads of all the different Hindu sectarian orders are represented on the VHP forum [on the RJB issue], and all of them agree [with the Hindutva organizations, VHP, BJP, and RSS] on the decline of Hindu society [emphasis mine]. . . . Our aim is to organize and unite Hindus.*²³⁶

Instead of organization, the unity splintered. A vaidyanath describes the fault lines in general and ahistorical terms:

²³⁵ Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, *The Rebel at Work*, New Delhi: The Hindu, Volume 22 - Issue 23, Nov. 05 - 18, 2005

²³⁶ Talking about organization and unity in religious terms, A vaidyanath had said: “You see in the Hindu tradition that I talk about, if the gods had really believed in preaching non-violence as the highest good they wouldn’t have carried the weapons that they did in their hands. Why do they bear weapons? Because they knew that without weapons a kingdom, a state, a society cannot be united and protected. . . . Durga [a Hindu goddess] is regarded as the symbol of power, and she is seen as riding a lion. Why? Because a lion is considered to be the strongest among the living species, so only a person stronger than a lion is capable of riding the lion. What kind of Durga sits on the lion? Not your ordinary Durga with two or four arms, but one with eight arms. What was the sentiment and symbolism behind this imagery? That two arms belonged to the brahmin, two to the kashtriya, two to the vaishya, and two to the shudra [the four primary Hindu castes]. So Durga says, you as a society can become strong and powerful only if you become united.”

So today every sadhu is seeing that these *sala* [expletive] politicians have divided the Hindus in different castes [for votes]. Hindu society is no more based on the ideals of Ram, it believes in caste-based hierarchies and ritual purity and untouchability. As sadhus too are paying the price.

When pressed on how political parties and institutions may have led to the splintering, Avaidyanath does not spare any, not even the VHP and the RSS who had provided direction and organizational support to the RJB campaign. Expressing his anger over the non-resolution of the RJB conflict, Avaidyanath declares:

VHP is not interested in protecting or not protecting sadhus. . . . Why do you think that we sadhus have nothing better to do than be with the VHP? We are with anyone who is fighting to protect Hindutva. We are with anyone who wants to avenge the wrongs and insults done to Hindus and Hinduism. We support anyone who wants to return to Hindus the pride and self-respect as Hindus. We [unlike the Hindutva organizations] are not trying to force all sadhus to think alike. They the RSS [BJP and VHP's parent organization] can write whatever comes to their mind. Tell me one sadhu who is active in their organization . . . The fact that some sadhus have become BJP MPs [member of parliaments] does not mean we accept whatever RSS says in matters of religion.

Avaidyanath's reference to the recurrent theme of sadhus' independence—and the inability of the RSS and VHP to rein it in—accounts for the main reason behind the splintering of Hindu nationalism.

Swami Paramhans: Inter-rivalry Among Institutions

One of the earliest instigators of the RJB conflict in 1949, **Swami Paramhans**, attributes the splintering to inter-rivalry among institutions, including those of sadhus, established and controlled by BJP and the Congress for supposedly resolving the RJB conflict.

As far as the RJB issue is concerned, the only dispute among Hindu organizations is over who should build the temple. It is the VHP that has done all the work and sacrificed a lot. It collected more than 18 crore Rupees [180 million] and has to pay interest on many funds. It spent a lot on foundation puja [shilanyas], on the wall outside the mosque, on acquiring 42 acres of land, on the Ram platform outside the mosque, on leveling the land and on bringing down the mosque structure. I am not against someone [like Congress and its Ramalaya Trust] building a temple or the RJB temple. Muslims and nawabs [Muslim kings] have donated money to Hindus for temples. The issue is removing one who has worked hard all this time [VHP and the RJB Trust] and who is working towards building the temple and then taking over from them to do the same thing. We were doing

it first. If someone else wants to build a Ram temple you can go and build another temple elsewhere.²³⁷

Kalyananand Brahmacharya, like many other sadhus, echoes the same theme:

VHP is the organization that took up the RJP campaign and is working to build the Ram temple. But there are several other Hindu organizations trying to do the same thing in their own ways. I told Shankaracharya and his [Ramalaya] Trust that let us all sit together and talk. But all these different groups want to take the entire honor. I believe that this way the temple will never get built.

And according to **Swami Sharadanand**:

Now many leaders in Congress have their own favorite guru, Chandraswami. Chandraswami is very well connected, even with criminals, and has a lot of money. He also has good relations with some sadhus. Now VHP has raised a lot of money for the Ram temple from Hindu devotees. Chandraswami is trying to become the leader of the RJB movement so that he can benefit from the money that he will get from Hindus. This is bad for the RJB movement.

The most contrarian views come from three prominent sadhus, **Puri Shankaracharya, Swami Gyan Das, and Swami Ram Das**.

Puri Shankaracharya: The Failings of Congress to Act Decisively

The Puri Shankaracharya believes that the campaign fizzled out because of the inability and the impossibility on the part of Congress to act decisively. The context, according to him, was the ephemeral alliance between sadhus and the BJP-VHP combine.

[S]adhus lacked organizational strength. VHP has the ability to get many things done, to organize large events, and it has trained grassroots workers. And the problem with VHP was that unless it had sadhus on their sides, people would not trust its campaign (for Hindu culture etc.), especially on issues that were religious in nature. So the need arose to choose a political party which would speak for us in the parliament and state assemblies. But after a while it started to look as if these sadhus have got deeply involved in the quicksand of politics and that they never would be able to come out of it.

²³⁷ Ever since the Congress prime minister Rajiv Gandhi had the locks of the RJB temple opened in 1986, he rarely came out openly to reject the idea of building a Ram temple. Fearing a backlash from pro-Hindutva forces, he, like his successor, Narsimha Rao, felt that the Ram temple ought to be built after consulting with Muslim clerics and Muslim representatives in a participatory manner, in order to see if a common ground could be found.

As far as this RJB issue is concerned, the effort of the [Congress] government is based on deception and its coercive power. They want to destroy this Hindu awakening that has come about as a result of sadhus. Congress does not want to build a temple. If the ruined structure remains, will the Congress government build a mosque there? If it builds one, they will lose Hindu vote and become a target for popular anger. Now if they build a temple then the Muslims who they are trying to appease will desert them. And if they leave that disputed site and build a temple and a mosque at a place close by then both the Hindus and Muslims will leave them. So what else can Congress do but to go on deceiving everyone? If they say that a temple will be built no matter what, then they will become BJP. And if they do not allow a mosque to be built no matter what, they will also remain the BJP category. What answer does Congress have to this problem? If they build a temple and mosque close by then both communities will get angry. So Congress has no way out except to pit sadhus against sadhus, and Hindus against Hindu in order to stop this Hindu consciousness from rising, and try to rule for some more time.

Mahant Gyan Das: The Failings of VHP and Its Adversaries

In contrast, Mahant Gyan Das, the head priest of the 200-year old Ram-centered Hanumangarhi temple in Ayodhya attributes the decline of the Hindutva combination to a combination of forces represented by VHP as well as its adversaries. As one who had led a very vocal march against the VHP in 2003, Gyan Das was considered among the most strident critics of the Hindutva organizations. He believed that by politicizing the temple issue, the VHP has caused a backlash among sadhus who want the temple built on *religious* grounds. In addition he attributes the splintering of the Hindutva agitation to the combined support of Samajwadi party in the state of U.P., the Congress, and the Ramjanmabhoomi Punaroddhar Samiti [RJB Reliberation Committee, or RJBRLC]. As the journalist Poornima Joshi reports:²³⁸

Thus, the Parishad's [VHP's] latest effort, the 'sankalp diwas' [ritual pledge] on October 17, 2003 flopped not just because of the UP government's intervention, but courtesy what Gyan Das [with the support of Congress and the RJBRLC] did on the days prior to the supposed religious ceremony. They built a popular resistance to the VHP within Ayodhya and persuaded people in the adjoining districts to boycott the occasion. . . . The mahant [with over 1000 followers, including the outside institutional support] went from house to house, making it a point to visit Mohammad Hashim, the oldest Muslim claimant to the disputed land in Ayodhya . . . and declared, '*Musalmanon par aankh uthayi to aankh nikaal denge*' [we will take out the eyes of those who look at Muslims with an evil eye].

²³⁸ Poornima Joshi, '*A Saint Marches In*,' New Delhi: *Outlook*, 30 October, 2003.

Given the fervor and this resistance to VHP and sadhus associated with it, even the prominent pro-BJP sadhu, **Swami Nritya Gopal Das**, expressing his disappointment at BJP's betrayal, declared:²³⁹

“[I am now for] dialogue with all concerned, including Muslims and Mulayam Singh [of the anti-BJP Samajwadi Party], to pave the way for temple construction.” He [Nritya Gopal Das], however, ruled out any dialogue with the Prime Minister or the Deputy Prime Minister [of the BJP]. “Why should we talk to them? They came to power with our support and now they have given up this issue.” “I’ll speak to [our ex-enemies like] Mulayam Singh also about solving this problem,” he said. He claimed that henceforth sadhus and sants would support only those parties that “support us in building the temple”. He said a solution to the problem was possible either by getting a law enacted or by mutual dialogue.

Nritya Gopal Das believes that sadhus' unity over the RJB issue is being affected by BJP's reluctance to pressurize the courts to pass judgment on the RJB issue. His views are echoed by Purnima Tripathi's assessment of BJP's divisive role driven by electoral compulsions to let the issue simmer.

As for the BJP, it will not be able to reap electoral benefits from this issue anymore, for two reasons. One, the party has come in for so much criticism from the VHP on this issue [about BJP procrastinating] that it is unlikely that the VHP will work for the BJP in the coming elections. Second, the BJP has been speaking in different voices on this issue and has lost credibility. “Even the most naive Hindu voter will not believe the party leaders if they say they want the temple to be built. For them, the temple is like the five-year plan, they remember it only at the time of elections,” said former BJP Chief Minister Kalyan Singh, now [anti-BJP] Mulayam Singh's comrade-in-arms. Kalyan Singh, who perhaps is the best person to comment on the loss or gain for the BJP from this issue, is certain that the temple issue has petered out and no matter how much the BJP tries to whip it up, directly or indirectly, it will not succeed.²⁴⁰

Mahant Nritya Gopal Das: The Intransigence of Mullahs and their Outside Supporters

A true insider in the RJB campaign, Nritya Gopal Das, at one point during my interviews, puts the entire blame on the decline of the Hindutva—besides its rise—on Muslims leaders and the “foreign hand”.

²³⁹ Purnima S. Tripathi, *Taming of the VHP*, New Delhi: Frontline, vol. 20, issue 22, October 25 – November 07, 2003.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

The reason why this RJB problem is not getting solved is not because of average Muslims. They fear that the Muslim clerics will excommunicate or throw them out of the community if they side with Hindus. Recently a liberal Muslim said some good helpful things and the Muslim clerics told him that they would not let him marry according to Islamic traditions. Another Muslim from Bengal joined the BJP and all the clerics issued a statement that they would expel him from the community and not allow him to offer namaz [prayers] at a mosque. You must have read in the newspapers that another liberal Muslim in Bombay was threatened by the clerics who said they would not allow him to bury anyone from his family in a Muslim graveyard. This is an important reason why the RJB problem is not getting solved even when many Muslims support the Hindus. The threats of Muslim clerics who are not from Ayodhya have instilled great fear among the average Muslims in the country. Overall these Mullahs get money and encouragement from foreign countries and that is why they feel independent and ready to fight. They openly talk about their relationship with Pakistan and other countries. Except for two or four Mullahs who are very fundamentalist, the Mullahs from Ayodhya hardly made any noise. They never even protested against the court proceedings that had been going on for years.

But Hindus should also not take a very hard stand and try to work things out.

The RJB conflict would easily have been solved if only sadhus and others from Ayodhya were involved. It was a local matter and we tried many times talk about it with Muslim leaders here. We even pleaded with news reporters to ask local Muslims to sit down with us to work things out. But like I told you there are a few orthodox Mullahs here who are pressured from outside [and other countries] to take a fundamentalist approach.

Swami Ram Das: Commercialization of RJB by VHP

The Ayodhya sadhu, Swami Ram Das, blames the fall or splintering on the commercialization of the RJB conflict by VHP. He believes that the BJP-VHP combine had managed to extract small concessions and win small fights by putting up a united and violent front against anti-BJP forces like the Samajwadi party and the Congress. This, according to Ram Das, has diverted their attention from achieving the religiously-inspired goal of sadhus to build a Ram temple, and helped BJP slowly consolidate power and raise money through contribution from Hindu devotees (a charge asserted strongly by the Lal Das, the ex-Pujari of the RJB temple who was allegedly murdered by VHP supporters). According to Ram Das, the divisiveness of the Hindutva organizations fooled sadhus for a while, but who saw through their game and distanced themselves:

VHP and RSS are not interested in God and they are not real believers. They believe in their flag, how will they believe in Ram? All they did was to raise Hindu consciousness

by going door to door for their own political purposes. But the thing is that their Hindutva will never succeed and we sadhus have come to realize this now because Hindus, Muslims and others have to live together and they don't want that. Because of their attempt to mobilize sadhus at all costs, we sadhus are now cursing them.

If BJP comes to power our mutts and temples will be in danger. They will steal all the wealth in our temples because they have no interest in religion. They will steal the temple donation and give it to their business supporters [like Dalmia] who will siphon it off. Then they will build factories from that money. They will chase us out, they will blame us for all wrongdoings, and they will call us names. We know now who they are and they have destroyed this [RJB] campaign. Even the Muslims are better than them!!! I am sure in the next elections Hindus will vote for the [vehemently ant-BJP] Mulayam Singh Yadav.

Ramnareshacharya: Supreme Court's Delay, and Party and Sadhu Rivalries

Casting a long gaze spanning 16 years, Ramnareshacharya summarized his views in 2008 thus:

When the disputed Babri mosque was demolished, [the Congress prime minister] Rao banned the VHP and many religious organizations who were part of the RJB campaign. He said that under the Constitution none of these banned organizations would be given possession of any part of the RJB structure, and that this was the first time after Independence a disputed structure of such significance had been brought down in an illegal way. The issue had been in the courts and now the Supreme Court would settle the dispute. He also felt that a Trust of neutral sadhus ought to be formed to help solve the dispute. So the Shankaracharya of Shingeri was the first to be put on the list. And since a Ramanandi [from the Ram community] sadhu had to be involved—because after all it is a controversy involving Ram and Ayodhya—I naturally was asked to be involved. But I said I had a few conditions. I will only become part of the group if only genuine religious teachers were involved. I said no not only to most VHP-aligned sadhus but also to Chandraswami who was close to Rao because he is not a religious person, because he does not know the ABC of religion, and because he has been involved with smuggling with people like Dawood Ibrahim.

Nothing much happened [meaning, the Ram conflict dissipated] because the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who was a Muslim, kept the issue unresolved [emphasis mine]. We had hoped that the government and the Court would grant us the land and we would build the temple. But when we did not get the land because Congress did not have the 2/3 majority in parliament to do as it wished. Now there are not as many people fighting for the campaign, many are very old or are dead. Those sadhus who led the RJB campaign are the very people who are cursing the BJP now for not getting the temple built. Even if the Supreme Court decides favorably for us the legitimate authority to build the temple will be the Ramanand sampradaya, the original litigants and the most important institution of the Ramanandi sadhus. No Shankaracharyas or other people have the legal right to build the temple or claim the land other than us and I am of course the main acharya [religious teacher] among the Ramanandis [emphasis mine]!!! There

is an old legal case in the courts between two groups so a third party cannot now come in the middle.

Recently I met an orthodox RSS man in Indore who was very disappointed that the BJP had distanced itself from the RJB issue. Several religious people who looked forward to the building of the RJB temple were harassed, a mahant [abbot] was murdered. Congress never did such things. We never cared about caste or political affiliation of a sadhu or a person who supported our RJB cause or who participated in the campaign. But the BJP that are descendents of the Jansangh Party do not like to get involved with sadhus who are visited by Congress politicians [like me]. *The BJP having come to power on the RJB issue should have worked with sadhus of all persuasions to get the temple built, but they became unsure of what might actually happen politically if they did so.*

According to sadhus' views, then, a number of *outside* institutions, including the main political parties and their allied organizations, are to be blamed for the fall of Hindutva from its golden years in the late 80's. There seems to be unanimity among sadhus that the political parties and their allied organizations are not nationalistic *enough*. This stands in contrast to the sadhu discourse on becoming sadhus for the welfare of the nation. Sadhus' discourse as revealed in the quotes on splintering above shows their disappointment in Hindus not get politically organized—in a “mild” fundamentalist way even—without their help. But given that sadhus are themselves divided, the external factors that led to the splintering include how one sadhu grouping views another sadhu grouping as an outsider, trying to take credit for building the temple and gaining honor and power (and devotees and their money). This implies that sadhus definitely do not constitute a monolithic bloc, a view that I will now explore next.

Level 2: The Diversity among Sadhus & The Divisions Within: Dissenting Views on the Fundamental Issue of Secularism and Role of Sadhus in Politics

While sadhus were overwhelmingly united on the issue of building a Ram temple at the disputed site after the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992, they disagreed over who should “own” the temple, who should build it—and therefore take credit for building it—and over even seemingly trivial issues like the design of the temple. From a political point of view, the more fundamental issue was the fact that sadhus disagreed over some of the overarching issues that had led to the rise of sadhu-led Hindutva campaign. The debate over the policy of secularism in a democracy—revealing sadhu's views on religious minorities as well—clearly stood out as a

central issue.²⁴¹ It triggered the debate that ensued after the unlocking of the gates of RJB, and sustained after the demolition of the mosque. In order to understand why sadhus' views on secularism matter in the first place, we also need to look at the differences among sadhus on how they see their role in politics (that is, their self image as political actors). This section (Level 2) examines differences among sadhus along these two axes.

The sadhus that I interviewed expressed a diversity of views on secularism and the role of sadhus in politics. On the secularism debate (Level 2A), these can be categorized into six ways of thinking, each placed along a continuum. **First**, a few held to a cynical view that secularism is irrelevant. **Second**, representatives of a minority view believe that the relevant government policies should be based on the common essence of all religions (such as, compassion and love). **Third**, a more common view stressed equidistance—that government should have uniform laws for all religious communities. **Fourth**, some believed that there should be complete freedom in the practice of religion—for all religious communities—with government stepping in only to preserve law, order, and peace. **Fifth**, an equally small group thinks that government should, at different times, provide special privileges to different religious communities in order to keep the religious life of the nation vibrant as a whole. **Sixth**, at another extreme is also a commonly held, but a relatively nebulous view among several sadhus that Hindu ethos should shape and guide the constitution. *As a context to the presentation below, it is important to note that the policy of secularism laid down in the Indian Constitution permits the government to become involved in the affairs of a religious community—giving grants, for instance—or in making of specific laws on religious grounds so long as it does not favor or discriminate any one particular religion.*

The discussion under Level 2B below reveals some prominent differences on the question of the appropriate role of sadhus in politics. The spectrum of views, perhaps predictably, ranges from no involvement, to outside involvement, and to total involvement as a politician.

²⁴¹ As I reported in Chapters I and IV, the contingent events that had acted as catalysts in the rise of Hindutva were the Shah Bano case—an attempt to appease Muslims—and the subsequent opening of RJB locks in 1986 to calm the backlash by Hindus over separate laws for Muslims.

Level 2A: The Differences over Secularism as a State Policy

Secularism Doesn't Matter or Nothing is Wrong: Swami Paramhans, Sant Ramdas, Prem Bhandari, and Ramcharitradas

The most cynical position on secularism—that it does not matter one way or the other is represented by **Swami Paramhans**:

What difference does it make whether a person is labeled secular or not, or which model of secularism you have in the Constitution. Nothing happens according to labels and principles. Muslim rulers like the Nawab of Hyderabad and Hindu rulers like the king of Gwalior would mix with people of other communities and celebrate their festivals. Political parties should stay away from artificially imposing a secular culture. Political parties should ensure the security of all communities. That is all. Secularism as a state policy has never been successful because it can never be implemented fairly in a multi-religious society. . . . You cannot deny that this is a Hindu nation even though its Hindu-ness may not be obvious. . . . Even in America, Christianity is unofficially the religion that is given importance and that is propagated the most. It is a Christian nation.

The importance of a nation rests on its land, and that of a land on its religion. Now even the Muslims also have a lot of respect and love for particular land. They will never accept if you try to remove them from Mecca. Try removing a snake from his hole and it fights back also. So does the farmer if you throw him from his farm. So does the bird if you try to move it from his nest. Affection towards the land of your mother and father, that is religion. Jews took earth from here and there, from America, and established Israel as their homeland. Why are they attached to Israel, only because that land is associated with their religion and their religious history. Tell them to leave and go elsewhere, will they do it? Those bastards they have left Tibet but are they happy? They don't want to let go off Tibet. Why, because they are attached to the religious significance of that land. So nationalism and religion [and secularism] can go together.

In a less literal way that “secularism policy doesn't matter at all”, **Sant Ramdasji** clarifies his views thus:

You cannot have laws based on Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh sentiments. All have to be accommodated. Otherwise the country will get divided up. So our Constitution is all right, there is nothing wrong with it.

Just because Muslims say they do not believe in Hindu religion, what will you do? Will you throw them out of India? Look at Nepal, a Hindu state [when the interview was conducted]. Muslims are not valued there. But even there the government did not expel them. So we have to live together.

Finally we have the view of the Arya Samaji sadhu **Swami Premanand**, who questions the very basis of a policy of secularism:

The word minority refers to a group that is weak and who is being discriminated against and needs protection. Government should help such a minority. The religion of the aggressor or the victim does not matter. But that minority also has certain duties towards the government. It should cooperate with it and not make things more difficult. Government should help but within limits and with dignity. Those who are really poor need far more protection and help. They are the real minority.

Swami Ramcharitradas represents the view that nothing is wrong with the policy of secularism as laid down in the Indian Constitution; only the target of the policy is misplaced.

Sadhus are the real minority group. No political party cares for us. But our secularism policy is right. If you are not happy with it, you can always approach the Supreme court or the President and appeal. Secularism in India is more democratic than in America where a President's view is forced down like a dictator.

Secularism Policy Based on Common Essence of All Religions: Swaroopanand Saraswati, Agnivesh and Phalahari Baba

Swaroopanand Saraswati, a sadhu alleged to be close to the Congress party and its top leaders, is regarded as the most important figure in the Shaiva community of Hindu ascetics. His party affiliation was transparent, given the fact that the Congress desperately sought his participation in the religious Trust and a religious parliament established to counter BJP's attempt to mobilize sadhus on its side. Expressing strong resentment against Muslim rulers who had defiled Hindus' sacred places, the flamboyant Swaroopanand is relatively silent about his views on secularism and minority rights. His reticence can be explained by the fact he is under immense media scrutiny and is forced to choose his words carefully, without offending any religious community. Predictably, he endorses the general Gandhian view that a secularism policy should be "sensitive to the demands of all".

The Arya Samaji "socialist" leader, **Swami Agnivesh**, is the most forceful proponent of this view.

Mine is like [Gandhi's], and is more positive. It is to discover through dialogue what is common to all religions, and to make that as the basis of building a new social, economic, and cultural structure. It is bound to be universal.

All these religions are talking about the agents that the supreme God or Soul or *parmatma* sent. They talk about Christ Mohammed, Ram or Krishna, and talk of believing in them. But what about the entity that sent these figures in the first place? No one is talking about that. These agents have become more important than the principal. So I will say that we have seen this world of agents, and why not now go to the creator that has sent these agents. I will ask people of different religions what their different conceptions of a creator are. I would make the commonality as the basis, in which common elements such as compassion, love, and happiness are present. It will be like the basis of an information superhighway. The realization that this entire universe is created by a single force and to find our place in it. Gandhiji too tried to use these universal, common elements of non-violence and love to transform politics. That face of Hindutva, that Gandhiji managed to present for a short time was the correct universal form. And God should not then be seen as one who gets angry at this or that who sends or speaks to us through agents, or one who calls his faithful to heaven and pushes other into hell. Instead, God will come to be seen as the creator of this entire universe, one who sustains all of us, one who has created certain laws within which he/she is also bound. Laws of nature that have love and compassion in them.

The recluse anti-VHP sadhu **Phalahari Baba** from Ayodhya gently makes a case for a special brand of universal secularism. He belongs to that group of sadhus who want diversity of religions and its expression to blossom.

The universal principles of all religions are good. In their application, they are affected by geographical and other factors, but in their essence they are all the same. Secularism could be based on that common essence, to not do anything contrary to what I myself desire. Secularism [also] means only that when the practice of a religion disturbs no peace, state has no business interfering in it. While people can always misuse religion to win votes and so on, the Constitutional definition of not discriminating between religions is perfect fine and a good ideal. Dharma-nirpekshita means letting all religions blossom, *not that you start counting which got a little more than the other [emphasis mine]*. This is all petty a sentiment. Should a Hindu think that he can live only by making everyone Hindus? Like the debate over using the name of Ishwara [Hindu idea of Divinity] at the start of a parliamentary session. Some say why not use Allah or something else? This is all rubbish. The idea is to use commonly used popular word of the time. If this is the trend of discourse, then things will become petty and you will have these small religious states, like Islamic nations. What does it matter whose name you take, Allah or whatever, like by it—make sure that you do not do anything wrong against the constitution. There is no solution if you are bent on creating mischief; but the Constitution, dharma etc are there precisely to solve those problems of weakness in human nature.

Nation is nation, it is not and cannot be Hindu, Muslim, or something else. This is all a result of divisive people. Rashtra is to take care of everyone, every individual, regardless of religion. Every thought on nationalism must be debated and applied like science and if

found useful and good they should be accepted. But no view on nationalism should be forced down people's throats.

Equidistance and Uniform Civil Laws: Uma Bharati, Avaidyanath Chinmayanand, Kalyanand Brahmacharya, Ram Vilas Vedanti, and Jagdish Muni

The *standard versions* of what is wrong with secularism as a state policy—as sadhus see it—are represented best by the two stridently pro- Hindutva BJP parliamentarians, **Uma Bharati** and **Mahant Avaidyanath**. Linking the problem of secularism with democracy, Uma Bharati asserts:

Democracy cannot function on passions [of minorities]. It will always run by the wishes of a majority. We cannot base it on sentiments and intensity of a few. The solution is that you must propagate your ideas in society to which you have become so passionately attached. You must make them acceptable to society as a whole [i.e. majority]. Imagine a single person who is immersed/obsessed in a particular thought or ideology. He has to convince the masses democratically. There is no other solution. People do it. Swami Vivekanand spread his message and became accepted; Acharya Rajneesh did it. Whether I agree with him or not, that is not the point. This is just an example. If you cannot get the masses accept your ideas, then your ideas are not worth accepting. It does not matter that you feel intensely about it. But if people accept you views, the majority will automatically be with you. This is what has happened with our RJB issue. People accepted it and with such depth and intensity that we were left behind and they moved ahead. We kept saying get down [from top of the mosque domes], but they got down only after breaking it.

Democracy means for the people, by the people, of the people. So if the sentiments of a majority of the people support temple building then to act on that basis is democratic.

Reacting to the critique that democracy and nationalism do not go together, Uma Bharati seeks a theologically-rooted justification.

God is not that important in this country per se because god is everywhere, like soul is everywhere, it is all pervading and it transcends national boundaries. But my body is very important for me. My body you know is made up of five elements—earth, water, fire, sky, and air. These are also the elements of a country, a land. So God is everywhere [doesn't need our attention as such] but there is the country, the body. So I have to take care of my country.

Avaidyanath's views seem to represent a wider perspective shared by many lay Hindus and BJP supporters. The discourse about Hinduism not being a religion, and Hindu tolerance, is part of the critique of secularism.

You can be equally tolerant of all religious sects or religions, but you cannot be dharmānirpeksha [being aloof from religion, as in secularism], because dharma and religion are not the same things. Dharma is that which binds people together in this world and that which orients us towards ultimate liberation [enlightenment, or *moksha*] in the other world. So an essential part of dharma is to integrate society and living by the natural law.

Hinduism is not a religion. It is way of being and acting in life, a way of life. It is a culture, a particular tradition of life. There are, among Hindus believers and non-believers [in God] and idol worshippers and those who don't. Given this toleration for different forms of worship, Hinduism is a very secular culture, and true Hindus are perhaps the most secular of all peoples in the world. Islam, Christianity—these are all religious creeds or sects.

We cannot adjust with those whose religious text says that say that peace will only come about if there is nothing but Islam on this earth, and to spread Islam through conversion or sword. . . . We are not narrow minded, we want to do promote Hinduism not through the sword, but through rational discussion.

So secularism, according to Avaidyanath and many other sadhus and lay Hindus, should reflect the distinction between dharma and religion, and between Muslim intransigence and Hindu tolerance:

[My] aim is to ensure that personal laws are the same for all citizens. Common laws should be enacted and everyone should have equal privileges. Today there are different laws on the basis of religion or minority status. Muslims are allowed to marry four times. This is absurd in majority democracy, for what you are doing is to allow minorities to marry four times. While you subject the majority to family planning controls, you allow a minority group the freedom from such controls and help that community to increase its population. This appears to be a way of reducing the majority to a minority status. The temptation of getting special privileges, is breaking up the Hindu society. For example, monks of the Ram Krishna Mission [like Buddhists, Jains and Arya Samajis] petitioned in the high court that they were not Hindus . . . in order to be free from government regulations and audits. . . . Everyone should have the freedom of worship, and given different religions and different forms of worship, government may have to do certain extra things to safeguard this freedom in the case of a particular religious group.

Remember the Shah Bano case. Would Muslims go broke if they were forced to pay alimony to the women they divorced. So the law was made that the parents of the divorced woman should bear the financial responsibility; and if that was not possible then the [Muslim] Waqf Board, which as we all know has no money, should support the woman; and if that too was not possible, then the Government of India should bear the burden of that divorce. This is strange. All kinds of things are happening as a result. A married Hindu man, if he wants to get married again to a Hindu girl, cannot do so because he will lose his job; so he and his future bride become Muslims—neither does he lose his job, nor he has to pay alimony to his ex-wife. When we object to such double standards in government policy, we are called communal, fundamentalists, and so on.

Avaidyanath's colleague, the BJP parliamentarian **Swami Chinmayanand**, underscores the same idea and adds a historical context:

In our entire constitution, the word “dharma-nirpeksha” [nothing to do with religion] is never mentioned. In the preamble too this phrase was not included in this sense. In the 42nd amendment, on Jan 3rd, 1977, this amendment took place at the time of the Emergency. It was a time when all citizen rights were suspended and all opposition leaders were put in prison [by the Congress leader Indira Gandhi]. The parliament was not in its full session. At that time the phrase “pantha [religious sect] nirpeksha” phrase was added to the constitution. The word secularism means pantha nirpeksha, it does not mean dharma nirpeksha. The idea of dharma nirpeksha is a fraud and misleading. There was no need as such [for I. Gandhi] to add the phrase “panth nirpeksha” to the Constitution [after almost three decades of its writing]. . . . There is no compulsion that everyone should belong to a panth or a tradition of worship. But what is necessary for life and social harmony, what sustains the life of a community is dharma.

More succinctly, **Kalyanand Brahmacharya** makes the same distinction:

People confuse Dharma with religion and want to separate politics from Dharma. But Dharma prescribes values that integrate society and the two should not be separated. Dharma should be universal, and separate [Dharma-based] laws should not be made for Hindus and Muslims.

A recurrent theme in sadhus' account of why the Hindutva forces rose the way they did is the idea that government has double standards built into its policy of secularism—a source of constant irritant for Hindus and disturbances between different religious communities. **Ram Vilas Vedanti** and **Jagdish Muni** summarize the commonly held view. According to Vedanti:

The Congress government does not say anything when Hindus are converted into Islam and Christianity. But when Hindus want to reconvert them to Hinduism, the Congress party suddenly raises objections. Ideally, no [religious] group should be allowed to hurt the sentiments of another group.

And for **Jagdish Muni**:

Today if you support Hindus you are called a communal person who is against secularism. But if you are for the Muslims you are called secular. Congress has distorted the meaning of the word secularism in order to appease Muslims.

Freedom in the Practice of Religions with the State Stepping in for Law & Order: Prem Bhandari and Veer Bhadra Mishra

Another view holds that there should be complete freedom in the practice of religions for all religious communities, with government stepping in only to preserve law, order and peace. The sadhu **Prem Bhandari** from the Radhasoami community holds the minimalist but somewhat imprecise version of that view :

My understanding is that when we talk of secularism, in the broad sphere of religion, it is that everyone has the freedom to follow his own religion. A Hindu has no right to criticize a Muslim, a Muslim has no right to criticize a Buddhist, and a Buddhist has no right to criticize a Christian. Right? Now if you talk of secularism in politics, the meaning will be different. Now it is also about freedom [but with different implications]. Now these sadhus [and other religious leaders] have been given certain freedoms, that they will not interfere with government's administration provided they live their lives of meditation and worship. And so they have no business to fight with the authority of the state. So those religious leaders who do that are not secular.

Similarly, **Veer Bhadra Mishra**, the Mahant of Tulsi Ghat in Benaras where Ram's epic Ramcharitmanas was composed, represents many moderate sadhus who do not believe there is any need to overhaul Constitution's laws on secularism. Given his background also as a professor of hydraulic engineering in a local university, his views are measured but stated as general principles:

My personal view, and I think most Hindus would accept this, is that I do not believe in utopia where one thinks about bringing a completely new order. We have to work with what exists today and bring changes to that. But we can always improve on these things. We have in India always recognized and given respect to collective wisdom. . . . Even our Vedas [the ultimate source of Hindu religion] are the collective wisdom of society. So I do consider the Constitution as a legitimate political authority. We cannot dump the whole thing for completely new order. We can change it in parts and it is evolving slowly. If the whole country wants there will be evolution and we will then talk about possible changes.

[Since In Hinduism] there isn't system of a pope and a church, there will always be freedom of opinion and differences among Hindu religious leaders. There will be no consensus on one Hindu law. And even scripturally and traditionally, we have the idea that any great sadhu *mahatma* [great soul] should not himself try to become a king [and dictate laws]. There is no cause for any alarm.

A Pragmatic View—Different Treatment at Different Times: Swami Ramananda Haryacharya:

The views of the moderate sadhu, Swami **Ramanandacharya Haryacharya**—generally opposed to the stridency of VHP—are important to the extent that they clarify in a more concrete way the relationship between dharma and secularism. But they also reveal a new element of diversity, in the sense that he *does* acknowledge Hinduism to be a religion and, more importantly, *he makes a case for treating different communities differently at different times.*

In terms of constitution, everyone should have the freedom to propagate and spread their faith. Everyone should be able to live according to one's cultural norms. All diversity within the country must be taken into account. But national dharma, *which will specify a citizen's rights [emphasis mine]*, should not be based on any particular dharma or religion because we have so many religions here. People should follow that common national dharma as they are doing today. Rashtra dharma is that which nourishes the nation, the society, the country, and the different castes. No one should be left behind, no matter who he is.

A farmer in his field, plants radishes in one corner, wheat in another, corn in another, sugarcane in another, and so on. Is there a conflict there? He harvests all these different crops and keeps them in the same granary. Each crop is harvested in its own way and is made use of as the situation demands, there is no conflict here. If you try to take sides, that I will only eat corn and disregard other crops such as wheat, the wheat will rot. So also, if you appease and favor only one group, caste, or religion all the time, others will suffer. Because a community or a group that is never protected and nourished will naturally suffer. So the leader of the nation should not follow a policy of [blanket] discrimination, otherwise the country's richness will be destroyed.²⁴²

A Dominant View—Infuse Hindu Ethos in the Constitution: Ramnareshacharya, Nritya Gopal Das, Vamdev, Brahmanand Saraswati, Kiladheesh:

Finally, at one extreme, is a fairly commonly held view among several sadhus that the Hindu ethos should be infused in the constitution.

The disputed head of Ramanandi sadhus and Mahant of Sri Math in Benaras, **Swami Ramnareshacharya**, has been accused of being close to the Congress party, particularly to its

²⁴² At a higher level of abstraction, Haryacharya makes the following remark about the relation between religion or dharma and politics: “We believe that politics without dharma is *langdi* (lame); and dharma without politics is *lola* (completely handicapped). If you do not have politics in dharma, no one will follow it [righteous behavior]. Following the Truth is dharma; but if one has to pursue false dharma for the sake a greater benefit, in war for instance, one should do that as well.”

president, Sonia Gandhi. Along with Shankaracharya Swaroopanand Saraswati, he was part the Ramalaya Trust, a grouping of moderate sadhus closer to Congress than the VHP-aligned ones.²⁴³

Despite accusations of being pro-Congress, Ramnareshacharya genuinely believes that he is simply neutral and objective, and expresses his views aggressively without any fear. As the following quotes show, implicit in his comments is also his support for Ram and the Ram temple, a stance that did not sit well with his ally, the Congress party. Thus he represents sadhus who claim not to be aligned with either of the two main parties.

The birth anniversary of Dr. Hedgewar [of the RSS, BJP and VHP's parent organization] was being celebrated once. After their speeches were over they asked me to give my blessings. I told them I am not that kind of a sadhu who just gave blessings. I told them it was wrong that Sanatan Dharma [Hindu religion] will be safe only because of RSS and VHP and its campaigns. [I told them] your work is like that of the [Christian] missionaries. Who has done more for Sanatan Dharma, Lords Ram and Krishna or RSS's Hedgewar?

[But] I have criticized Congress very harshly also. I have said that the Congress is the root of all the trouble. If it had taken up all these controversial issues first after Independence in 1947—like Ramjanmabhumi, Krishnjanmabhumi, etc.—none of this would have happened. This disease would not have spread. No one would have said anything, not even the Muslims. *There would have been no controversy over secularism and all that stuff [emphasis mine].* Who is more important for the nation, Ram, Krishna or [the secular] Mahatma Gandhi? I say that if [the Muslim chief minister] Farookh Abdullah supports the construction of the Ram Temple and helps resolve the conflict I will support him but not vote for him. I will only say that he has done a good work.

The Congress which is a party of the forward castes [unlike most sadhus]. It calls itself modern and secular but they [the Congress leaders] are hypocritical and liars. They are a party of landlords and elites. . . .

²⁴³ As reported by Rajeev Dikshit, "He [Ramnareshacharya] added that 'it is not correct that the Ramalaya trust is trying to create division among seers. Jagadguru Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati and other seers were also interested in the construction of Ram temple. But we have distanced ourselves from the purnahuti yagya [a religious ritual to be performed near the RJB site] as the VHP leaders have made a history-sheeter [referring to Swami Paramhans and his alleged crimes] the chairman of Ramjanmabhoomi Trust,' he added, refuting the charges that he and Swami Swaroopanand were working for the Congress."

Rajeev Dikshit, "Ramalaya Trust opposes VHP", Lucknow: Times of India, 12 Mar 2002.

Despite his differences with BJP and the Congress party, his ambivalent support for building the Ram temple can be described as moderate, objective and practical—lending itself well to his views on secularism described later.

Like we want the Ramjanmabhumi to be built. . . . Everyone should feel like that, even Muslims because they are citizens of this country. Everyone will benefit if the temple is made. There won't be any strife and violence everyday. And now this useless demand from most sadhus that it should be built in the *Garbhgriha* [sanctum sanctorum of the disputed structure]. Is Vishwanath temple [another disputed structure in Benaras] in the Garbhgriha? The whole world is available where you can build a temple in. You make shops wherever you can. You have dips in the holy rivers wherever you can. You do not insist that you will only bathe in the Ganga river or in Haridwar [near its source] because only then you can collect spiritual merit. What they should have done was to build a grand temple, the entire city of Ayodhya is Ram's. But they [many sadhus and VHP] created this useless and vicious atmosphere, their intentions are not good. How many times has the Vishwanath temple been destroyed and rebuilt. There is a mosque there right now. If they had insisted to build on the very same spot the Vishwanath temple would not have been built.

Given his relatively unique, complex, and ambivalent views on what it means to be secular, I separate his comments on state secularism from those of other sadhus.

The law and the Constitution are above everything; but in a democracy everyone, even sadhus, have a right to express their problems through the parliament and hope that those problems would be resolved there. But that is what the role of a political leader is—to act as a mediator between the government in power and what people want, including sadhus.

I am against the idea that we should treat all religions equally in a democracy [emphasis mine]. If population determines who comes to power then the religion of the majority should have preeminence. If a guest comes to your house who will dictate the terms, you or the guest?

All places, all cows are not the same. We give more attention to some cows than others. We will not treat our wives the same way we treat our servants. So there has to be a more serious discussion about secularism. All these years you did not provide enough employment to the Muslims and did not do much for them economically. So is the case with Harijans [lowest caste Hindus]. Now all these communities are reacting.

Then there are those sadhus who, despite being associated with the BJP and VHP, call themselves apolitical, and regard the debate over secularism as a non-issue—had it not been for the intransigence of fundamentalist Muslim leaders. **Swami Nritya Gopal Das**, who took over Paramhans's chairmanship of the VHP's Ramjanmabhoomi Trust in 2003 after Paramhans's failing health, is a good example.

We sadhus follow Ram and not any political party. We give our blessings to anyone who talks in favor of the Ram temple and Hindu causes and we condemn those who are against it. We do not need any political party's help in doing that. But if an organization comes and tries to help us we will give it our blessings.

The reason why this RJB problem is not getting solved is not because of average Muslims [emphasis mine]. They fear that the Muslim clerics will excommunicate or throw them out of the community if they side with Hindus. Recently a liberal Muslim said some good helpful things and the Muslim clerics told him that they would not let him marry according to Islamic traditions. Another Muslim from Bengal joined the BJP and all the clerics issued a statement that they would expel him from the community and not allow him to offer namaz [prayers] at a mosque. You must have read in the newspapers that another liberal Muslim in Bombay was threatened by the clerics who said they would not allow him to bury anyone from his family in a Muslim graveyard. This is an important reason why the RJB problem is not getting solved even when many Muslims support the Hindus. Overall these Mullahs get money and encouragement from foreign countries and that is why they feel independent and ready to fight. They openly talk about their relationship with Pakistan and other countries. Except for two or four Mullahs here who are very fundamentalist, the Mullahs from Ayodhya hardly made any noise. They never even protested against the court litigation that had been going on for years.

Lakshman Kiladheesh suggests further splintering of laws governing religious communities and caste groups. His views are therefore shared by many orthodox sadhus who find VHP and BJP's brand of religiosity as crass populism, manufactured for contemporary times. Given his mindset, secularism as a state policy seemed out of the question. He is a staunch believer in the caste system, and therefore resists the idea that all Hindus—let alone Muslims or other minorities—ought to be treated equally by law or the government. In that sense he finds BJP *too secular* because of its insistence that laws for all citizens should be the same. To the extent that BJP tries to sneak Hindu ethos in the Constitution and laws, it does so, according to Lakshman Kiladheesh, by simplifying Hinduism in order to mobilize Hindus, with a distorted and diluted form of secularism.

Equally indignant with the effects of secularism on culture is **Swami Vamdev** of Mathura.

According to him it fuels consumerism with its attendant problems:

Nothing is sacred from the secularists' and consumerists' point of view. And so these [secular] English-educated people say that we should not insist that cow is a religious issue, that we should not regard it as a symbol of something that cannot be used as a consumer product. This economic mindset that goes with this kind of secularism is harmful not just for our culture but it also creates strife.

The preceding analysis of the diversity in sadhus' views on secularism as state policy reveals that sadhus did not constitute a monolithic bloc. Rather, they disagreed on the fundamental aspects of what was at stake in the RJB conflict. This disagreement contributed to the difficulty in preserving sadhu unity, though it does not fully explain it. After all, sadhu diversity predated 1992, the time of the Ayodhya riots and the highpoint of sadhu unity. There is a final level that reveals the pulls and tugs on the sadhus, and this focuses on the identity of sadhus as sadhus, which is examined in the next section.

Level 2B: Differences Over the Appropriate Role of Sadhus in Politics

Despite the distinction in the preceding section between Dharma and religion, the debate over secularism involves a fundamental argument about the sources of appropriate laws that may help “integrate” society and bring about order. Many sadhus see themselves as inheritors of knowledge contained in ancient Hindu religious texts (such as the Vedas). Not surprisingly, they want to play some role in politics—as their predecessors seem to have done from very ancient times. Access to this esoteric knowledge, coupled with a passion they develop for Hindu causes through a study of those texts, allow many sadhus to see their political activism as natural. What follows is a textured view of four positions on the role of sadhus in politics, representing the image sadhus hold of themselves. **First**, that sadhus should become as involved in formal electoral politics as any other citizen; **second**, that sadhus' political involvement should be nuanced and from a distance; **third**, that sadhus should stay away from politics altogether; and *fourth*, that their involvement or non-involvement is a non-issue.

A. Sadhus and Total Political Activism

The first is the view of the sadhu priest **Lal Das**, who recommends full political immersion of sadhus under certain conditions—a view based solely on the role of sadhus in ancient Hindu epics and mythology. Comparing sadhus to gods who come down to earth as avatars during times of crisis, Lal Das declares:

In our tradition, there have been great [activist] sages ... but they stayed within the tradition of sadhus.

Whenever sadhus saw major problems or crisis in society, they would indirectly exercise their influence and leave an impression. Sage Vashisth did not lift the sword himself, but he persuaded Ram to do it. In [the epic] Mahabharat, Krishna himself did not lift the weapons [in the battle], he persuaded Pandavas [his allies] to go forward and destroy Duryodhana [the enemies]. The sage Narad never went to the battlefield himself, but in most battles between gods and demons, he was the instigating and the guiding force. So also, sadhus of good character should rise and give a direction to society. *The need of the time is such that spiritually inclined sadhus of good character should openly step into politics, and should tell people who is a sadhu and expose fake sadhus. If they do not do this, this society will perish. As far as Hindustan is concerned, it is sadhus who have always showed the right way. [Emphasis mine]*

Stated somewhat differently, the BJP parliamentarian, **Swami Chinmayanand**, who may be expected to endorse the activist role, links his argument about sadhus' involvement with the source of the moral authority of sadhus:

Sadhu is one who takes a vow to lead a life to serve society. One who without taking anything from society, submits himself to doing service for society. . . . That is the source of his moral authority in politics.

Ever since I joined politics, I feel I have impressed people. [As a sadhu] I have also impressed the parliament because of my objective and non-discriminatory views.

Look, the idea of sadhus renouncing worldly pursuits was never intended in the meaning of [ascetic] renunciation. To say that sadhu should distance himself from worldly and political life is absolutely wrong. Sadhus do not get influenced by worldly life; they influence wordily and public life. There is the distinction.

[Even in modern period], during the Independence movement against British rule, farmers were the first to take up the freedom struggle, and the sadhu Siyaram Sharan was their leader.

In contrast, another BJP parliamentarian, **Mahant Avidyanath** whom we encountered earlier, justifies sadhus' role in politics in non-altruistic ways:

If we limit ourselves to philosophical reflection and meditation in times like these [during the tough RJB campaign], it will be inappropriate. In fact, we can do such reflection properly and without any worry only when the external environment is conducive to that activity, when there is peace within society and the country. But if someone is challenging your honor, and despite having been born in this culture, they are conspiring

to destroy Hindutva or the very culture into which we are born, if there are threats to the nation's borders, during those times a sadhu must leave his religious and philosophical reflection in order to prepare people to meet the challenges head on. My experience is that all this we talk about, our religion, our Dharma, the glory and heritage of our culture, if we want to keep them alive we sadhus cannot be limited to talking to people and doing prayers.

The influential BJP **Uma Bharati**, who distanced herself from the RJB campaign and the party, recognizes the possible limitations of sadhus' role in politics, and supports it by making a distinction between her personal and public life:

The burden on sadhus is always there of helping the poor, the orphans, etc. Yes if the BJP comes to power there will be some extra work for sadhus [in politics]. But everything in Hindu society won't become all right just with BJP coming to power. There are so many problems with Hindu society, exploitation in the name of caste. There are millions of people still who do not drink water in the houses of [low caste] Harijans. *Sadhus will have no role in giving direction to the government if BJP comes in power [ironic, since she was part of the BJP government; emphasis mine].* For example, a BJP government was formed whatever decisions were taken by the government and not on the basis of what sadhus said. And sadhus even got angry with many of these decisions because they were not to their liking. But when these were explained to them, they became convinced and they agreed that those were government decisions and had to be practical that they should not interfere.

As far as I am concerned I was involved in social and political work even before becoming a sadhavi. *If I am concerned about social work for the benefit of the poor, as I was and as I am, and if I can be more effective through political methods then what is the problem? My reason for becoming a sanyasi is a very personal one. That had nothing to do with my profession which is politics [emphasis mine].* I told my party workers even when I was the Chief Minister not to treat me like a sadhavi. Out of fear or respect they had a problem, and I always told them that for them I was a minister, and for myself I am a sadhavi.

Like many sadhus, **Ramchandra Paramhans**, the instigator of the RJB conflict, sees no inherent problem with sadhus becoming politically active, but—given the powerful symbolism associated with sadhus—suggests their involvement only under special conditions:

I support sadhus becoming MPs and running for elections—although personally I am not interested in that. I have fought elections for MLA [state legislature], MP [national parliament], municipal level seats, from top to bottom, but I do not believe sadhus will be very effective in that role. But when it comes to issues like RJB, and when no political leader is bold enough to raise his voice against this onslaught on Hindus, then if sadhus enter the political arena directly then that is fine, I have no objections to that. Although Mahatma Gandhi [a religious figure] did not hold any political office he did not distance

himself from politics. Historically sadhus have always influenced political and social life [reference to politically motivated conversions of low caste Hindus].

Brahmanand Saraswati sees a danger in sadhus becoming a political force; but justifies nevertheless the fully active role of a sadhu in politics:

It is all right for a sadhu to associate himself as an individual with any political party. That is his right as a citizen and a voter. But collectively sadhus should not support any political party. That will create division in the society.

B. Sadhus' Qualified Involvement from the Outside

The **Ex-Shankaracharya Satyamitranand** represents a skeptical view of sadhus' effectiveness and yet justifies their political involvement given the sway they hold over the Hindu society.

If in that 521 seat parliament you were to put 280 selected sadhus, you might see that dream of Ram Rajya [the ideal state] getting realized. But, given the pressures of politics today, I think that even those 280 sadhus might not be able to maintain their self-restraint and self-righteousness. Because power intoxicates and leads one away from sadhu-ness. So my personal view is that sadhus should influence political debates, but should not as individuals contest for political power.

Puri-Shankaracharya elaborates on the theme:

The honor and dignity of sadhus is not there if they work through the parliament. Householders should be encouraged to take up such roles. Because there is a difference in the life style of householders and sadhus. Sadhus should provide direction from the outside. Through their lives as renunciators and philosophers and idealists, the sadhus should make sure that they themselves do not fall into corrupt practices. We sadhus should train political leaders. Just like the sage Samarth Ramdas who trained Shivaji to rule but did not himself try to rule. The sages Vishwamitra and Vashishthji prepared Ram to rule, they themselves did not try to rule the people. It is all right for sadhus to take up the role of helping supply able political leaders.

Right from childhood [after becoming a sadhu] I had the desire to help guide political leadership for the welfare of the nation. And I felt that I could help make politics more just based on the wisdom of ancient sadhus and ancient knowledge. And for this I spent ten years or so, studying the epic Mahabharat till two at night. As you know, in Mahabharat you have analysis of politics of all kinds, good and bad. So in this way I have become proficient in the knowledge of governance also, and I can give excellent advice to prime minister and president on how to run government, if they want to.

According to **Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopanand**, sadhus, by remaining outside the direct political realm, can be more effective not only in mobilizing people and inspiring political rulers, but also in controlling the whole political process itself.

In our tradition, with us earlier politics was a very pure and noble thing. Politics was necessary so that Truth and what was for the welfare [Dharma] for all could be promoted. This required politics or political authority for its enforcement. At these times, mahatmas (sadhus/sanyasis) would go among the people and create conditions for the king to start observing and enforcing dharma among the people. The sadhu commanded such respect that even the king did not dare to disobey him. The sage Samarth Ram Das mobilized people, and gave the Hindu king Shivaji the inspiration and the instruction to fight against a much superior Muslim king Aurangzeb.

There is no need for a legislative role for sadhus [in the making of laws in parliament]. Let me explain. The point is that in parliament we sadhus cannot do as much in a selfless way as we can by staying with and educating the public. Our political influence will be more acceptable morally by staying outside. If we ourselves go there in the parliament things will be different. *First of all these is the party discipline and party whip that sadhus will have to live by. We cannot control the party's leader. But if we work from the outside and have people on our sides we can control everything. [Emphasis mine].* Mahatma Gandhi did not try to hold political position. Therefore, if he revolted from such a position even the Congress leaders Nehru or Patel could be thrown out of office.

C. Non-Involvement of Sadhus in Politics

The recluse **Phalahari Baba** from Ayodhya questions the popularly held view that sadhus should act as political advisors because that is what their historical role had been in the past.

As far as sadhus guiding kings and political leaders in the past, that is not true. The king was supposed to be surrounded by thinkers and intellectuals well versed in legislation, policy, social science type of knowledge. The king was supposed to frequently go to the spiritual type sadhu so that through that interaction he could keep his unwavering vow to do good for others, so that his personal ambition and greed did not come in the way.

A sadhu deep into meditation cannot give proper advice on social policy. Not good to mix these two types. Sadhu is one who lives a spiritual life in a very focused and efficient way. He will become ineffective if asked to advice on political matters.

[Earlier] a sadhu was like a fire: go to him, you get light and warmth, but disturb him and you get burnt. Sadhu was a person who through his behavior and thought would provide

inspiration for the fulfillment of a society's aspirations and who would stand up to help. The majority of sadhus [today] are not turning to political realm, very few. Politics is becoming a status symbol, so they are going there. Democracy tries to glorify the citizen and politically active person, so these sadhus feel that they too must join politics.

Mahant Veer Bhadra Mishra is the abbot of the hermitage from where Tulsidas wrote the epic story of Ram. He straddles the traditional and the contemporary worlds. He taught hydraulic engineering at a university in Benaras and is intensely engaged in environmental issues. Given the simple life that he leads, the flavor of elitism in the following quote is somewhat misleading:

Sadhus are insignificant politically. Remember what I told you yesterday about dictatorship of the proletariat. Now by proletariat Marx meant those who have nothing to lose but their chains. So how can such a proletariat do anything, like fly planes, do surgery in hospitals, lead and manage a country. So Marx said that de-classified middle class will initially provide leadership for the proletariat. So our sadhus are not proletariat as such, they are devotees and worshippers and they have no experience or skill in statecraft. You will not be able to make a list of 100 sadhus who are competent or have that experience. Of course the [4th century BC] sage like Chanakya wrote a whole book on statecraft. But you cannot use Chanakya's book to run a government today. What instructions would you get there in dealing with say IMF and powerful states like the US and China? What most sadhus know is irrelevant for going through life and business in today's world. Ask these sadhus, for instance, how the World Bank is controlling things these days. Ask them, brother, what is this bio-diversity all about. I will be damned if they can tell you. So the fact that they speak only on the basis of what is written in the scriptures is silly, and a lot of them say whatever comes in their heads in the name of scriptures problems about India, whether it is about size of government or whatever. Of course there are some general things in our ancient texts on politics and other areas of knowledge that are relevant today. But generally only through cooperation between worldly knowledge and the scriptures can things be managed properly today. [But] in the end all this power will go to someone else, not the sadhus. Sadhus have no role in active politics.

Compared to the "modern" discourse of Veer Bhadra Mishra, the rustic **Mahant Nritya Gopal Das** talks about sadhus' role in familiar traditional terms. Sadhus, according to him, should think of their role in terms of their dominant image as religious characters who bless people:

As I told you we sadhus as preachers of Hindu religion, ethics and morality will continue to talk about reform and corruption in society, as we have always done. We do not need any political party's help in doing that. But if a political organization comes and tries to help us we will give it our blessings.

I know a few sadhus are there in parliament, but I do not think that being in active politics is the right thing for sadhus. Sadhus should remain in their traditional seats and ashrams [hermitages] and do social work from there. Once they get involved directly in politics they cannot remain above jealousy, hatred, criticizing each other—and all these things are not what sadhus are meant to do. Besides, once sadhus join a political party, such as BJP, they will come under that party's control.

On the other extreme end of the spectrum is the view of **Swami Vamdev Maharaj**. He suggests an apolitical technique for sadhus to achieve political ends.

I feel that religious leaders and sadhus should spread their messages and [conduct] political campaigns through collective prayer. One thing is clear that in all such public protests and campaigns politicians cannot help themselves from participating and end up playing a role. You cannot wage a broad-based campaign on purely religious or spiritual levels without politics sneaking in somehow. It is only natural that we sadhus then ask people for their votes for that party [which supports us].

We sadhus should try and reform the mindset of political leaders through praying as a collective. I did so through ritualistic prayers involving 60 sadhus . . . The public had difficulty in understanding the meaning and usefulness of this form of collective prayer. They fail to see that it is rare for corrupt minds to reform themselves on their own. Politicians with such minds will end up killing each other.

D. Sadhus in Politics as a Non-Issue

Swami Ramnareshacharya believes that the whole debate over the appropriate role of sadhus in politics is a non-issue.

We believe that religious faith and social service through politics are one and the same things. To give medicines to those who are ill, to give food to those who are hungry, this is *daan* [or gift], this is religion. When government does this it uses the word help, but we see *daan* or giving as a form of religion. The epic Gita says it well: sadhus should motivate people to do good things.

The law and the Constitution are above everything; but in a democracy everyone, even sadhus, have a right to express their problems through the parliament and hope that those problems would be resolved there. *There is nothing wrong in seeking solutions to religious problems through parliamentary methods involving political leaders and political parties [emphasis mine].*

The main point is that sadhus do not a private life. In fact our lives are totally public and therefore for the larger public good. By joining politics we do not become more public.

For sadhus like **Sakshiji Maharaj**, sadhus' involvement in politics is a temporary one and a necessary evil for a greater cause:

You know the story of Lord Shiv drinking the poison to save the human race. We sadhus do not like all the chaos and things are that happening [the RJB conflict], but we have taken the poison for the welfare of this country. To fight an election for that is all right. . . . *We sadhus do not want to hold political power like religious leaders do in Iran.*

As in the case of the discussion on different views on secularism, this presentation of views on the appropriate role of sadhus in politics was meant to show that sadhus do not constitute a monolithic bloc. To what extent did the diversity of such views lead to the splintering of the Hindutva movement. Although there were outside forces that may also have helped in that decline (Level 3 above), I believe that the commonality among sadhus was a far more critical factor in the splintering, and it is to that theme I turn next.

Level 3: The Splintering: The Common Demolisher Within

I have shown thus far that during the late '80s and the '90s sadhus' activism was linked with the dramatic rise in 1989 and 1991 of a politically insignificant party, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). The sadhus and the BJP came together over the controversy of whether a Hindu Ram temple had been destroyed to build a 16th century mosque. It propelled *a few religious actors* from a diverse group of relatively recluse but popular *sadhus* to band together and consolidate a fragile victory engendered by a politically influenced court judgment. In the early '90s, support for and intensity to build a grand Ram temple was unanimously strong among sadhus. However, both the coalition between pro-BJP *sadhus* and the BJP, as well as the intensity for building the temple, unraveled over the next decade. Not only did the newly emergent BJP broaden its political base by distancing itself from a single issue, the unity among *sadhus* also splintered. In the previous sections (Chapter IV and Part II & III of this chapter) I described the combination of outside forces—such the electoral manipulations of political parties—and the differences among *sadhus* as factors that explain both the unity among sadhus in one period and its splintering in another period.

As I indicated in Chapter I, the **working hypothesis** that guided this thesis is that the passion and unity among sadhus in building the Ram temple were eventually undermined by the common identity of sadhus as *sadhus*. They are individualistic, free-floating, religious individuals who became sadhus very rarely to pursue any social cause, but to live a life free of responsibilities and in tune with their natural propensities, inner calling, and detachment²⁴⁴. *Diversity among sadhus, turf battles over who will build the temple under what political alliance, the court's changing stances, and the vacillating role of political parties—are all contributing factors that explain variation in intensity and strength of sadhu unity over time. But an unexplored idea that I bring to this discourse is that the inherent common elements in the identity of sadhus as sadhus temper fundamentalist tendencies.*

Individualism, in the sense in which I and sadhus often use the term, refers to self-declared goal across sadhus to remain free—despite their ascetic regimen of self control practiced in varying degrees. In the case of sadhus a feeling of non-attachment and disenchantment (*vairagya*) often precedes the decision to become a sadhu and lead a life free from diversions, aimed directly at a chosen goal (that often leads to a commitment to Hindu causes).²⁴⁵ *Vairagya* and self control reinforce the quest for freedom. While the premium placed on leading a free life bound by self-control allows many sadhus to acquire fluid and contradictory identities, it also implies a deep-seated impulse to remain independent and refrain from making long-term political commitments. As the sadhu Swami Vasudevanand Saraswati explains:

Sadhu is that person who is sadhana sampanna, who has perfected spiritual practices. *He who has restrained himself, controlled himself in every way, and tries to control others, he is a sadhu. The sense of freedom that comes from that self-control and non-attachment is what being a sadhu is all about. [Emphasis mine.]*

²⁴⁴ As indicated later also, it is extremely important to note that sadhus, and for that matter most Hindus, infuse the idea of *sanskaar* to the idea of inner calling, thus making our actions today a result of unfulfilled desires and traditions inherited from previous birth. In the case of sadhuism, another element is involved in what adds up to the idea of inner calling, and this concerns the psychologically or socially conditioned feeling of *vairagya*, or detachment from attachments—a push factor in the making of sadhus. In what follows I include the notion of *sanskaar* and *vairagya* while talking about inner calling.

²⁴⁵ Etymologically the word “sadhu” refers to the idea of attaining a goal as efficiently and directly as possible in a manner where external factors do not act as diversions—therefore the idea of leaving the life of a householder—and where internal turbulences do not create doubts—and therefore the idea of gaining self control through various yogic and other mind-body exercises.

The sadhu Sandhyagiri Shastri echoes the same idea:

The idea of a sadhu rests on *tap* [penance], knowledge, and sacrifice. By penance we try to control our physical and mental senses. That allows us to apply our knowledge in a focused way for the welfare of people. *We are not diverted [we are more free; emphasis mine]*.

Finally, the Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati on individualism and freedom:

Vairagya [non-attachment] of a sadhu means the desire for *tyaag* [sacrifice] of the pleasures of the senses [understood in a broad sense]. When *vairagya* is induced by circumstances, that is artificial or superficial *vairagya*. *True vairagya is when a person wants to become a sadhu because he wants to remain free of all attachments.*

How do we put such independence and individualism in context? What is it about sadhus as sadhus that make them such fierce free-floating individuals, ever poised to rise, recoil, and retreat as entrepreneurs and entrenched players in an ever expanding religious market?

It only seems logical to examine the commonality among sadhus by understanding the motivations that led them to become sadhus in the first place.

INNER CALLING AND ENDURING DESIRE TO REMAIN FREE: COMMON ELEMENTS IN WHY SADHUS BECAME SADHUS

The analysis of the interviews below shows that sadhus became sadhus because of a variety of factors. First I look at a prototypical case where the desire to become a sadhu was an innate calling, early in life, and where the longing to remain free endured over time. I then look at a few typical cases where, despite objections and guided by a calling, a decision was involved to leave home to pursue different things in a focused and undistracted way in the company of sadhus. Finally, I look at a few cases where some “magical” events urged individuals to start on the path of a sadhu way of life. What is common to all these cases is the element of freedom—the desire to be free from commitments at an early age and from long-term commitments and diktats later. Organizationally, I first explore the idea of freedom as it relates to becoming a sadhu. I then show how that notion of independence affects freedom from affiliations, long-term commitments, and diktats. Taken together, these two ideas of freedom constitute the commonality among sadhus that led to—as I argue—the splintering of the Hindutva campaign.

Being a Sadhu and the Quest for Freedom

Uma Bharati represents the ideal case because her story reveals a bit of all three catalysts that put sadhus on the path of a renouncer. For all practical purposes she started leading the life of a sadhavi when she was about seven years old, giving religious discourses throughout India and abroad over time. A widely-held “magical” story about this fiery religious speaker concerns a sadhu who died while saving the child Uma Bharati from drowning. The legend goes that the soul of the sadhu reincarnated itself and materialized itself in the body of Uma Bharati. Her rhetorical skills in religious oratory and interest in religion are believed to have been influenced by the hidden sadhu within. Although I did not remind her of this story, Uma Bharati states:

I was always like that [religious and spiritually inclined]. If something unusual had happened to me I would have probably left this life as a sadhu. My natural life is the life of a sadhu.

[My] mother died in February, 1981. I was stricken by grief, sad and lonely because I was not emotionally attached to anyone except my mother. Because of that I started to stay in the village in the same house where my mother lived. I stopped travelling, meeting people, and giving religious discourses. I was very depressed but after a year or two I became OK. [and started taking interest in the problems of farmers].

My reason for becoming a sanyaasi is a very personal one. When I became active politically I was also at an age to get married and my family wanted me to get married to this young doctor from America or the UK. *But I decided I wanted to become a sanyasi because I wanted to live life free [emphasis mine].* That had nothing to do with my profession which is politics. I told my party workers even when I was the Chief Minister not to treat me like a sanyaasi. Out of fear or respect they had a problem, and I always told them that for them I was a minister, and for myself I am a sanyaasi.

What my guru said to me when I took sanyaas or what he says to me is a very private matter between him and me. Only my guru can monitor my relationship with him or on sanyaas. . . You may question me about my politics, if I take bribe, if I sell my country, if I am dishonest, or about my political ideology. Otherwise no one but my guru has the right to question me about my sanyaas or my spiritual life.

What is interesting to note is the coexistence of her inner calling to be free, and living a life full of responsibilities as a major politician. In many other cases this kind of coexistence manifests itself when sadhus juggle a spiritual and a religious life with managing their temples, hermitages and temple properties. It seems that the important point about sadhus may be to become free from conditions not of their own choosing [coming either from the households into which they

were born, or as top-down diktats from political parties], in order to pursue an independent life, whether out of choice or otherwise.

In contrast to those who were born with a fairly fully developed sense of sadhutva or sadhu-ness, a majority of sadhus belong to the group where a routine experience played a transformative role. In such cases, the inner calling (natural propensities and the inherited *sanskaar*) to lead a religious life is linked with a feeling of intense detachment (*vairagya*), a sense of choice engendered by a catalytic event, and a strong desire to live a life free in the company of sadhus. Often, the sadhus-to-be begin the journey by living a simple uncluttered life of a celibate student absorbed in religious texts, and, in rare cases, by plunging into social activism at a very early stage. The following respondents illustrate these journeys.

Mahant Nritya Gopal Das—the passionately detached devotee—left his home in the pilgrimage town called Mathura Vrindavan as the religious and the spiritual calling emerged at a very early age. As we know, he later became the head of the RJB Trust established by VHP to build the Ram temple.

I became a sadhu out of devotion to God and to realize Him. *There was no pressure from anyone on me to become a sadhu. It usually happens out of free will and with a sense of detachment from worldly desires and with a desire to become free.* Then when I was about fifteen years old I had an intense desire to study our religious texts and be in the company of sadhus. Over time this association and reflection over the nature of God led me to decide to become a sadhu. When one reaches that stage one does not need anyone's permission, and the decision to get initiated into a sadhu order is entirely a personal one. People in my family did not object because they also did not see anything wrong in a sadhu way of life. They did not ask me to come back to the family and felt I was in a good place [Ayodhya] in the company of good sadhus.

I joined the Ramanand religious community. There was no choice involved, our *sanskaars* [inherited desires and tendencies] takes us wherever we go. I never knew which sampradaya I would go to, which guru I would go to and finally adopt. Whatever God willed I followed. There were no incidents or events that pushed me one way. *I just let myself drift, and whatever came my way I accepted [and I wanted to be free so that I could do that, emphasis mine].*

Sadhus like **Sakshiji Maharaj**, **Swami Vamdev**, and **Swami Chinmayanand** share experiences similar to those of Mahant Nritya Gopal Das.

I got initiated into the sadhu community when I was 8 years old. Nothing had happened that forced me to become a sadhu. It was just a feeling of vairagya [non-attachment] that had emerged within me and I left home and I felt free. (Sakshiji Maharaj)

One thing is definitely clear, that we are living out the unexhausted tendencies of previous lives. In order to awaken those tendencies and become aware of them, we need outer social circumstances. *And after that was awakened, I turned to a sadhu way of life in order to exhaust those inherited tendencies and become free [from pressures, inherited or otherwise, emphasis mine].* (Swami Vamdev)

As a child I was a very quiet person and stayed to myself. I did not go out to play with other children. I had a serious nature. And I was interested in reflecting on subjects like spiritualism and religion. One day after my exams at college, I was returning home. Felt that someone was controlling me and instead of going home I boarded a train. I did not leave home to become a sadhu. I always was curious about life. I was searching for something. I was not interested in food or conveniences of life. When I settled down as a sadhu away from home I felt free to pursue my search. *It was mostly inspiration of another kind, spiritual you may call it, and wanting to remain free, that led me to become a sadhus.* (Swami Chinmayanand)

Less other-worldly is the case of **Swami Ramnareshacharya**—a self absorbed recluse—who we encountered earlier as the influential pro-Congress sadhu. His transformation in his own words:

Among sadhus small events from your pre-sadhu life are unimportant and we do not take much interest thinking about them.²⁴⁶ I was in the VIIIth Class when I left Bihar and I studied in the Sanskrit tradition because I was not interested in other subjects. I wanted to become an intellectual and spread knowledge all around. *I wanted to be free and did not want any restriction and any responsibility in my pursuit of knowledge.* Then I did not have any intentions to become a sadhu. All I wanted to do was to remain unmarried and study about enlightenment, philosophy, and detachment,

Adversity does not make a man a sadhu. Today so many people are suffering but most of them are not becoming sadhus. All these superficial reasons that may act as catalysts. But we believe that virtuous and sinful deeds [or *sanskaars* from previous life] set the direction of one's life.

Despite being in the company of sadhus in Banaras I had no interest in things like achieving salvation or God or things like that. I was continuously asked to become a sadhu by other sadhus in the hermitage but I declined to do so. *I wanted to [even] remain free from the responsibility of becoming a sadhu,* I simply wanted to study and spread

²⁴⁶ Technically and according to tradition a person renounces the past when he becomes a sadhu. Compared to lay Hindus, therefore, sadhus, resist such inquiries.

knowledge. But they kept urging me softly. Finally the sadhus gave all kinds of practical and philosophical reasons and I gave in and received the Diksha (initiation ceremony) from a very famous Guru. He was also very inclined towards knowledge like me. Over time I became the head of this Ashram. Once I did not believe in Ishwar [the Divine] and now I started believing in it and believing in a whole lot more. Now I do not get surprised when someone talks about going to the sun because there so many marvelous things in this creation that no surprising thing now looks surprising.

We encountered **Swami Ramchandra Paramhans**—the despondently detached—as one of the sadhus who instigated the RJB conflict in 1949 by placing the idol of Ram in the disputed structure. His story is as simple as his self-image, and the achievement of freedom allows him to overcome his deep sense of detachment.

I am a simple sadhu. I was born in Chhapra district in Bihar in a Brahmin family. At the young age of twelve I could feel strongly the emotion of *virakti* and *vairagya* [detachment from worldly attachments]. . . After my parents died, my older brother, a teacher, doctor, and a scholar of Sanskrit, Hindi, and English brought me up. He was a great patriot and nationalist. I left home to study Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy in Sanskrit institutions and in the company of sadhus and [finally] settled in Ayodhya. This is my life in short.

I got my education and initiation in Kashi. I was in the VIIIth Class when I left my family in Bihar and I studied in the Sanskrit tradition because I was not interest in other subjects. So my main interest in coming to Banaras was to study Philosophy and advanced Sanskrit. *I wanted to be free and did not any restriction and any responsibility in my pursuit of knowledge.* I felt that if I got married then family responsibility would increase because that is what I saw with others all around. Then I did not have any intentions to become a sadhu. All I wanted to do was to study and remain unmarried.

At that age the idea of choosing a religious community is not an issue or the motivation. I had studied under Swami Ramdasji and through him I met another influential sadhu Sri Brahmachari Ramkishoredasji—who also meditated near my birthplace. I was attracted and he initiated me in the Ramanandi community as a sadhu. He was by nature a true sadhu, very simple with a large heart. *I wanted to be free like him [emphasis mine].*

I am born in a Hindu family. Complete freedom and diversity in thought and unity in diversity is the essence of Hindus and Sanatan Dharma. I wanted to remain free. The rest, why I became a sadhu, I consider to be due to my inherent nature and *sanskaras*/tendencies accumulated from childhood or from a previous life.

An average householder makes choices, I want this and not that; and if he does not get what he wants he is unhappy. *A person who has managed to become free of worldly attachments—a true sadhu—will welcome whatever comes his way, as if that is what he*

*always wanted. The sadhu type is not unhappy because he is disenchanted and detached.
[Emphasis mine]*

Sadhus like **Lakshman Kiladheesh, Prem Bhandari, Puri Shankaracharya, Jagdish Muni,** and **Ram Vilas Vedanti** were other good examples of the experience illustrated by Swami Paramhans.

Before **Baba Lal Das** became the head priest of the RJB temple, he was a simple village bumpkin who drifted with the many sadhus who crisscross the Indian landscape. His case is typical of those who find the village life routine and uneventful:

I came in the sadhu society during my childhood. There were a few sadhus in our village and that had an impact on me. I was studying in the primary school. It was just the beginning stage. I was about nine years old then. These sadhus used to do a lot of pujas [prayers and religious rituals], and I liked that very much. At that age there is hardly any deep understanding of these things. It just felt nice to see the worship of gods, to hear kirtans [devotional songs], to see prasaads [food sanctified by gods] being distributed among people. My mind turned to these things and I enjoyed the company of sadhus, and then I went away with them. [My family] tried to stop me a lot, they tried their best. *But when they saw that I was just not interested in the normal [bounded] way of life,* they finally came to accept my interests and ambitions. I came to Ayodhya and I went around with sadhus to different pilgrimage centers throughout the country. . . . I liked this independent life.

Many of the Vaishnav sadhus like **Gyan Das** and **Ramcharitradas** were enchanted and motivated by the simple factors as in the case of Baba Lal Das.

In contrast to all the other sadhus discussed above, **Swami Agnivesh's** case is the only one where the inner calling converged with a strong sense of social activism in the making of this rebel sadhu. His story is unique—in the sense that he, unlike others, became a sadhu to do socially useful things—and therefore the need to reproduce it at length. Unlike others, he came from a relatively affluent family—his grandfather was a minister of sorts in a princely estate in Madhya Pradesh.

I thought of being a sanyasi, a sadhu, at a very early age. I do not know why I felt like that but must have been some *sanskaras* from a previous life or what. When I read the stories of Dhruva, I used to think that I too like Dhruva should do some penance and become a sadhu. Once or twice I ran away in the nearby mountains and forests, thinking that penance is done in those places. . . . Then when I came to Calcutta for college, I got introduced to the Arya Samaj [a Hindu religious order that abhors idol worship and ritualism]. . . . It is written in Satyarth Prakash [the main religious text of the Arya Samaj] that ordinarily a common man should proceed sequentially through the three stages in life before becoming a sadhu at an old age. But it also says that if one has to do some specially unusual work in a certain field, he should move from the celibate student life directly to the sadhu stage. I had always felt of doing something special. After studying and commerce and law from Calcutta, I started teaching business organization and law there.

Although I was inspired by the Arya Samajis, I saw the state of society around, the poverty, the hopelessness, the social inequalities all around. . . . I felt that I could not do anything about this by teaching in a college. . . . I was also upset by religious conversions that were being carried out by Christian missionaries. I felt if the trend continued they [the converts] might one day demand a separate homeland. . . .

And then I met Swami Indraveshji [of the Arya Samaj]. It was nice to see a young celibate sadhu with a strong and beautiful body. His thoughts also were very progressive. Swami Indravesh inspired me, and he suggested that I leave my job at Calcutta and come and work with him in Haryana. He did not ask me to become a sanyasi. *[Later] when I told my mother I wanted to become a sadhu because I could not do my work freely, she agreed [emphasis mine].*

Meeting Indraveshji was critical, as I felt that here was a person as young as I was. He too had left his family, dot not get married, and he too had taken a vow to be free to bring certain change in the country and society. So I thought if these people can do it, why can't I.

Today, that freedom has allowed Swami Agnivesh to become a champion of a range of movements and campaigns, most importantly in his work with bonded laborers, underprivileged women, low caste and untouchables in the Hindu community, and with leaders of different religious communities.

Finally, for some sadhus, extraordinary events – magical and miraculous – propelled them to the sadhu way of life. **Phalahari Baba**—the recluse intellectual—of Ayodhya is a prototypical case. In his words:

I came into contact with great sadhu when in high school and was very impressed. I told him of my doubts about soul and God, and that how can I believe in those things when I cannot see them. The sadhu said, the question of belief applies only to things you cannot see, if you can see something where is the question of belief. And then a magical thing happened that converted me. He stood behind me with hands folded. When I looked back I saw him crying profusely and when I turned away I saw a very magical sight in front of me [does not go into details]. What I saw impressed my simple child-like mind. After that I became his disciple and did what he told me to do. Before he died he had told his wife about me, to introduce me to a certain sadhu in Ayodhya. I left high school and moved fast towards this [sadhu] life. Even otherwise I was not very interested in studying and had become a bit of a ruffian, I liked to hang around. *This new life seemed peaceful and I felt free.*

I mostly concentrated on meditation and spiritual exercises. I did not go out much and did not do deliver religious discourses. I did not feel I had achieved anything miraculous. *I consider the blossoming of unbounded and free spirituality within oneself as the main goal and that is what I was doing, not preaching.* When you that you remain quiet. You do not start building organizations. . . . Although I am a mahant [abbot] of this Rajgopal temple Trust, I was forced to take this position because I was close to the previous mahant. They asked me become its head so that its properties would not be looted by other sadhus.

Somanand Baba from Patna in Bihar, like Phalahari Baba, is a prototypical case that illustrates the role miracle in the making of a sadhu. He was a doctor, trained from Darbhanga Medical College in Bihar, who became enamored by sadhus in the village where he practiced medicine. One of the sadhus, who later became his guru, took special interest him and started introducing him to the esoteric world of spiritual practices. The transformative experience, described in great detail as a mystical journey, shows his guru standing behind him, inducing him into a mystical trance, where Somanand “sees’ himself traveling throughout the world, visiting places he had never been to, and meeting famous people, dead and alive. So shocking and liberating was the experience that Somanand gave up his profession as a doctor and became a sadhu. *As he says, “the experience had made me feel liberated and free.” [Emphasis mine.]*

Others like **Madhavi Ma** and **Swami Ramdas** talk of similar but less dramatic experiences that put them on the sadhu way of life. In the former case, Madhavi Ma describes a vision she had of how she was born—a description that bears a remarkable similarity with that of the birth of Lord Buddha. Embedded in the story is the imagery of emerging in the world after breaking the shell of a huge egg. She too talks of this experience in terms of an intense feeling of freedom that led

her to adopt the identity of a sadhu. Ramdas's story descends to a personal account when he was so confused that he could literally not see anything around him but a shadow of divinity. Although the feeling calmed him initially, it left him immobile till a sadhu—later his guru—miraculously freed him from his cocoon and guided him ironically to a life of greater freedom.

A COMMON DESIRE: INDEPENDENCE, AND FREEDOM FROM AFFILIATIONS, COMMITMENTS, AND POLITICAL DICTATES

As the presentation above demonstrated, while sadhus became sadhus through a variety of experiences, they responded to an innate calling (some from early childhood, some through transformative experiences), and importantly, they shared an innate desire to be free from dictates of society. This translated into an overarching desire to stay from political compulsions and party commands.

Sadhu after sadhu I interviewed repeatedly and proudly emphasized the theme of independence from political affiliations and freedom to pursue their own passions. Some prime examples of the *common* reluctance to make affiliations and long-term political commitments—the major reason for the splintering of the Hindutva movement—among sadhus across the political spectrum are illustrated below:

Stridently pro-Hindutva Sadhus

The point is made forcefully by the strident pro-Hindutva and BJP MP **Mahant Avidyanath** himself:

Why do you think that we sadhus have nothing better to do than be with the VHP? We are with anyone who is fighting to protect Hindutva. We are with anyone who wants to avenge the wrongs and insults done to Hindus and Hinduism. We support anyone who wants to return to Hindus the pride and self-respect as Hindus. We are not trying to force all sadhus to think alike. Whoever wants to be with us is fine, whoever wants to not associate with us that is also fine.

They the RSS [BJP & VHP's parent organization] can write whatever comes to their mind. Tell me one sadhu who is active in their organization except in the very specific issue of the RJB. The fact that some sadhus have become BJP MPS does not mean we accept whatever RSS says in matters of religion.

One who wants to serve society in a very single-minded and intense way cannot be attached to his family or a narrow cause. There will be too many diversions, and that is why a person becomes a sadhu or sanyasi. Even a social worker serves society, but with sadhus it is something else. Sadhu does social service for his own inner welfare for the prosperity of his inner self [he is individualistic].

Sadhus want to remain free to do their social service. [BJP MP Swami Chinmayanand]

Puri-Shankaracharya

It is like this. He [Vamdev, the main force behind RJB] is neither with BJP nor with the VHP. The only reason he associated himself with the VHP is because sadhus lacked organizational strength. And without organizational backing and strength it is difficult to work. VHP has the ability to get many things done, to organize large events, and it has trained grassroots workers. Sadhus naturally could not find in a matter of few days such trained workers. And the problem with VHP was that unless it had sadhus on their sides, people would not trust its campaign (for Hindu culture etc.), especially on issues that were religious in nature. People generally believe and trust saints and sadhus. So VHP did not have sadhus and the sadhus did not have organizational strength.

But sadhus remained cautious and alert so that they did not get misused by BJP and the VHP. And after a while it started to look as if these sadhus have got deeply involved in the quicksand of politics and that they never would be able to come out of it. Those sadhus who think of the welfare of all, who do not speak badly to anyone, who in the interest of the nation do not hesitate to even criticize the government—now it started to appear as if the BJP and VHP were controlling the sadhus. *But slowly sadhus have reestablished their autonomy and strength, and BJP and VHP members now must recognize the leadership of the saints and sadhus. BJP and VHP are not dominating the sadhus; it is the sadhus who are all over the BJP and VHP [emphasis mine].*

Vamdev Maharaj

It is like this. I have no concern with what the RSS believes in. My view is that we are at a point when we have to assert that the national ideal is Ram and not the Muslim Babar [who allegedly destroyed the Ram temple]. Therefore because this Ramjanmabhoomi temple that has been destroyed to build a Babri mosque, there should be a Ramjanmabhoomi temple here. That will recreate the idealism that Ram represented as the most virtuous person and the most just ruler. Whoever is helping us in that cause we support them. *We are free to support whoever we want.*

I am not associated with any political party as such. And whatever relationship I have with BJP/VHP is whenever they talk in favor of the RJB issue and then they have our support.

Mahant Nritya Gopal Das

There are some sadhus who do not want to align themselves with VHP because VHP is supposed to be a political organization that is not actually interested in religion. These are minor issues. Look at Muslim organizations. There are hundreds of them at work. The same is true with Christian missionary organizations. When we think of Hindu organizations, there are only a few who are working for Hindu causes, the Arya Samaj, VHP, Brahmo Samaj, and Bharat Sadhu Samaj. It does not matter if Arya Samaj is against idol worship. We sadhus support it and any other institution, including the VHP, that is for the unity and organization of Hindus, or that think about what is good for Hindu society. *But we do not support those institutions blindly. Our support for pro-Hindu organizations including the VHP is on an issue-to-issue basis and we sadhus do not quarrel over larger philosophical/political principles [emphasis mine].*

We sadhus follow Ram and not any political party. We give our blessings to anyone who talks in favor of the Ram temple and Hindu causes and we condemn those who are against it. Our role is not restricted to the RJB cause. As I told you we sadhus as preachers of Hindu religion, ethics and morality will continue to talk about reform and corruption in society, as we have always done. We do not need any political party's help in doing that. But if an organizations comes and tries to help us we will give it our blessings [emphasis mine].

Once sadhus join a political party, such as BJP, they will come under that party's control. *Sadhus will lose their individualism and freedom if they join politics and that is the most important thing [emphasis mine].*

After splitting from BJP, the former BJP parliamentarian **Uma Bharati**, one of the movers of the RJB campaign in the late 1980s, declares:

While we are putting more emphasis now [in 2008] on issues like unemployment, corruption, and infiltration of foreigners [Muslims] we will work with BJP whenever they take up liberating the temples in Ayodhya, Benaras, and Mathura. In fact we will support *any* political party that takes up those temple issues but we will not directly participate in the political activism. We will also support VHP on this issue because, after all, both BJP and VHP are wings of the RSS, although we are not a wing of the RSS now. *If I want to consult with RSS leaders I do, but I am not bound by their advice because I am independent and I have an independent mind [emphasis mine].*

Ramchandra Paramhans, the instigator of the RJB campaign who sneaked the idol of Lord Ram in the disputed temple-mosque in 1949:

See I am not related or linked to any party, BJP, Congress, socialist, or the communists. But whichever party is for Hindutva or contributes to that cause I support that party.

[Ideally] a person who has managed to become free of worldly attachments—a true sadhu—will welcome whatever comes his way, as if that is what he always wanted. The sadhu type is not unhappy because he is disenchanted and detached.

As for affiliations are concerned, VHP is not an organization of sadhus. It is a Hindu organization. It is too much to expect that every sadhu or Hindu will become associated with any one organization, that is difficult. So also you have many organizations in Islam. Not all Muslims are with Muslim League, some are with Congress, some are with socialists etc. *At an individual level you cannot stop a sadhu from going to any organization. You have atheists among sadhus too. But they too have done great things for society. So a sadhu is not limited in his work just because he is a member of VHP or any other organization. Sadhu belongs to whole country, whole society, and whole world. In democracy there is no restriction, and there should be none, on which organization a person or a sadhu associates with. A sadhu is perfectly free to associate himself with a political party, BJP or VHP, or Congress. It is natural for sadhus or other groups to have differences in terms of ideology, philosophy, political views, and on particular issues—these differences are of no significance. [Emphasis mine.]*

My [political] aim is not simply to build a temple but to create the awareness of being a Hindu among Hindus. Hindus are losing their self respect and self pride as Hindus. So if Hindus feel Hindu enough then these hermitages will remain and if they remain then I will remain an abbot here. *So I am trying to protect myself, brother!!! I am not into all this to save Hinduism!!!*

Ram Vilas Vedanti

I was influenced by the principles by the RSS which wanted to organize Hindus [and sadhus for that cause]. But I saw that all our sadhus are not united at all. They all have different outlooks and customs and keep fighting among themselves. *They are too independent [emphasis mine].*

But the people [sadhus] who have tilled the land, sown the seeds, cut the crop, and produced the bread have the first right. We sadhus who were with VHP and who did all the hard work, who raised the slogan, ‘Say it with pride that I am a Hindu, only we have the right to build the temple, not other sadhus.

Acharya Dharmendra

[Although] RSS created a platform [by establishing the VHP] for different sadhus to come together, it and the BJP do not set any guidelines for how we sadhus should act.

They themselves say this again and again. They do not make our agenda, we sadhus make their agenda. If they do not like what we say then we will give our blessings to any other organization. We will not give BJP our blessings [simply because it has a Hindu agenda] because giving blessings is not our profession. *We [sadhus] will not be ruined if we do not give blessings to [and associate with] any party [emphasis mine].*

Lord Shiv, the greatest sadhu of all, married twice. Being a sadhu has to do with character, to stay in the water and yet remain untouched by it.

BJP MP Adityanath Yogi

If any political party supports our ideas of a Hindu cause, we support it. But if it doesn't we sadhus move ahead without the help of that party. I have often defied the whip of the BJP in the parliament.

Interestingly, during my interview with **Sadhavi Rithambara** in 2008—perhaps the most visceral, anti-Muslim rabble rouser during the RJB campaign in late 1980s—there was no mention of the RJB campaign as an issue that needed the attention of sadhus. There is therefore nothing to quote but that fact in of itself indicates the extent of sadhus' independence the movement's splintering.

Moderately pro-Hindutva Sadhus

Couched in religious terms, **Swami Haryacharya** describes sadhus' independence thus:

Some agree with me some don't. Some say that I am against BJP and the VHP. But there is nothing to these criticisms. It is all superficial. I am neither against nor for these things such as the VHP or their Hindu causes or anything like that. I believe in the Hindu Dharma, I am a Hindu, that is all there is to it. I believe in the Hindutva as defined in the Vedas [ancient Hindu religious text]. I do not believe in wearing the red cloth and displaying my Hindu-ness in a shoddy way. I do not believe in this RSS definition of Hindutva.

In my opinion, sadhus are not linked with anything or anyone or any party. You do not understand this. He does not belong to anyone. [Emphasis mine.] They [the politicians] are thinking that they are using sadhus, and the sadhus are thinking they are using the political party. There is nothing to that.

Brahmanand Saraswati

We sadhus believe in worship and devotion. When the Pope makes a statement all Christians follow him. When a fatwa [religious decree] is issued from a mosque, all Muslims follow it. There is no such thing with us sadhus. *We are all scattered and independent like Hindus themselves [emphasis mine].*

Vidyanand Giri Maharaj

While we sadhus are fighting for Hindutva, the most important Shankaracharya, Swami Swaroopanand, was against us. He has no standing among the sadhu community. Once we had organized a rally of about 300,000 Hindu supporters. At the last time Swaroopanand met the prime minister and had it cancelled. All because he wanted to be seen as independent and for his own personal glory.

Swami Ramcharitradas

I am the chairman of the Ramjanmabhoomi Volunteer Committee. We have been in Ayodhya long before the [RJB related] Trust was established by VHP and the Congress. We have been maintaining the temple for devotees to come and pray. *We did not care which political parties our members are with. They [the BJP and the Congress] tried to make me join their trusts but I refused. Our organization is about 45 years old. We sadhus are independent of them and our only aim is to serve Ram [and his devotees]. [Emphasis mine.]*

Stridently anti-Hindutva Sadhus

Lal Das

On the whole we Ayodhya sadhus are opposed to Hindutva. . . . They [the BJP and the VHP] want us to believe in the basic RSS principles. . . . There is a lot of fear that they [BJP/VHP] have instilled here locally. So much terror that if you say it openly here against VHP and Hindutva, you will be killed. *But I do not care for it, I am free and fearless [emphasis mine].*

So in sadhu samaj [society] there are these two kinds of people. There are those who feel disenchanted and detached from worldly pursuits and became sadhus to satisfy spiritual cravings. *The other, more spiritually inclined sadhus, do not want to be controlled to by anyone. They want to remain free and independent thinkers [emphasis mine].*

Phalahari Baba

[When I became a sadhu] I stayed mostly doing sadhana, did not go out much and did not do much propagating because I did not feel I had achieved anything miraculous. I consider the blossoming of spiritualism within oneself as the main goal [of sadhuism] and that is what I was doing, not propaganda. The goal is to become a complete person and when you have achieved that, to remain quiet. Not through outreach and propagating, because then you get into organization, not building yourself or others into complete persons. *As a sadhu I do not believe in associating myself with any organization and political cause [emphasis mine].*

Prem Bhandari

So freedom, the concept of the freedom as given out in our way of thinking is that you go beyond that . . . to the purely spiritual region and then you have become free from all attachments and desires of this life [political or otherwise].

Swami Agnivesh

I don't agree with the VHP or with the sadhus associated with it. *The most important thing is when one becomes a sadhu, a sant, a swami, or a sanyasi, then he does not remain a Hindu. A [real] sadhu has to be universal in his outlook. He leaves all narrow identities when he renounces his family, wife, children—all that is over. Finally, he even he even gives up his name and acquires a new one. This final symbolic act is supposed to help him transcend the past and past identities and take on a new one that is universal and not related to any particular religion or caste or nationality etc. He is supposed to wear clothes that express that non-identity, like what a sanyasi wears, simple and non-sectarian. But even then people associate monks with particular religions, with Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, etc. But as far as the sadhu/monk himself is concerned, he cannot favor any one religion or a sect. A sanyasi, a monk fights only for the Truth and not for sectarian politics. And therefore I say I am not a Hindu and not with VHP. {Emphasis mine.}*

Politics by nature is divisive, takes sides. A sadhu/monk, if he is involved in politics, has to raise his voice even if he sees something bad in his own party, and should support a rival party if it is right. Even though he did not wear what sadhus normally do, Gandhiji was a sadhu and he worshipped Truth above everything else.

Differences among sadhus shows freedom from making long-term commitments. *Differences are natural as with any group. Among the sadhus that are socially/politically active or who have aligned with different political parties, the alignments are not fixed and keep changing [emphasis mine].* Take Shankaracharya Swaroopanand. He is not a

member of the Congress party but he is a political sadhu who keeps supporting different political issues all the time without much consistency.

Because a true sadhu is free, he should do that and he does not need courts and government institutions to judge or legitimize his actions. History will be judge. They have an autonomy in how to achieve those ends, with or without the support of government or political parties. . . . To be a [real] sadhu you have to be a non-conformist, like an artist, like Gandhi was. Organization makes a sadhu profit-oriented. Truth cannot be pursued in a religious organization; those are organizational truths. Lot of compromises have to be made and there are lot of vested interests there, like in the State or an institution.

Sant Ramdas

These people with VHP do not believe in God. They only believe in money and power. If they establish themselves in Ayodhya they will drive us Ayodhya sadhus out. They will grab our temples and hermitages. . . . Sometimes I feel even the Muslims are better than them. . . They will start calling sadhus names, this one is a scoundrel and that one is a fake. They believe in the RSS. *We sadhus do not believe in anyone. We are not with anyone. We are sadhus. [Emphasis mine]*

[Echoing Jagatguru Swami Ramanandacharya], you don't understand, we sadhus are not attached with anyone [at least for all the time].

The stridently anti-Hindutva mahant **Veer Bhadra Mishra** shares the institutional perspective indicated by the moderately pro-Hindutva sadhu Brahmanand Saraswati. Mishra equates sadhus' independence and their diversity in thoughts and behavior with the fact that Hinduism lacks a centralized ecclesiastical structure, a single Holy Book, and a commonly accepted Savior or Messiah. But as the interviews above has shown, instead of relying on such structural correlations, the contribution of this thesis rests on the empirical data—how sadhus themselves viewed their independence and freedom (to pursue Hindu religion and spiritualism) as factors that led to the unity among sadhus during one period and the splintering at another time.

Summing Up

I had emphasized earlier that while outside counterforces (such as political parties and their allied organizations) and diversity among sadhus were contributing factors that explain variation in intensity and strength of sadhu unity over time, I also suggested that looking at the commonalities within sadhus was an unexplored idea worth examining as an important independent variable.

The commonalities that we observed in sadhus' discourse about their motivations behind becoming sadhus rested on a set of related and recurrent themes—inner calling, detachment, individualism, independence, and freedom. How do these recurrent themes add up into a coherent whole?

To begin with, let us recall the idea of individualism that I outlined in Chapter I. I argued that the primary motivation behind a person becoming a sadhu is to remain free to do whatever (including this-worldly acts), leading to a state where sadhus can partake any identity, even contradictory ones. In Chapter II I described eleven popular and sometimes contradictory images of sadhus that add to their powerful enigma and that reinforce the sway they hold over the popular imagination. The sense of freedom that emerges from a life of relative self control is more radical, focused, and intense than the “modern” but distractive impulse to be simply free. It is the essence of sadhus' identity as sadhus that they remain fiercely free and individualistic in this sense. In short, sadhus' individualism and identity are significantly fluid but dense and intense.

As for the other variables: scholars who have studied sadhus from a psychological perspective have often claimed that depression and disenchantment are factors that have driven individuals—particularly from the lower income classes in India—to become wandering sadhus who nevertheless are accorded a high status as holy men.²⁴⁷ Such studies ignore the idea that depression may inextricably be linked with a longing to become free of responsibilities and an inability to pursue an “inner calling”—a combination of natural propensities, unfulfilled desires

²⁴⁷ See Chapter II for relevant references. The life of one of the most enigmatic 19th century sadhus, Swami Ramakrishna Paramhans—the guru of Swami Vivekanand discussed in Chapter III—has been studied extensively from this perspective. See, for instance, Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982.

and traditions from a previous birth—and a strong sense of detachment from attachments (see footnote 228 above). Individualism—another commonality—is also implicated in this idea of freedom. As I indicated earlier, individualism, in the sense in which I have used the term, referred to a self-declared goal across sadhus to remain free (from responsibilities of a householder, for instance) despite self control, and even to acquire fluid and contradictory identities if the situation so arose (dramatized in Chapter II). It did imply, however, a deep-seated impulse to refrain from making long-term political commitments or functioning under political diktats.

Given this complex notion of freedom, the upshot is the propensity of sadhus to rise as a political force under certain conditions and recoil under other conditions—all out of free will. And this uniqueness among sadhus is what I have characterized as the crouching Hindu serpent—as in the famed *kundalini* in *yoga*—that gives rise to a strain of fundamentalism that withers away remarkably. In the following chapter I will discuss the political implications of such a phenomena.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The thesis sought to make both a theoretical and empirical contribution in helping understand the independent role of religious leaders in explaining a dramatic rise and subsequent splintering of Hindu nationalism in India over the last decade and a half. This concluding section is organized in five parts: the significance of the Ram story; the essential and multiple identity of sadhus; the significance of sadhus as a political force; the significance of sadhus in the broader field of religion and politics; and the political significance of the thesis.

A. The Story

Given the centrality of the character of Ram in this story about the rise and fall of Hindu nationalism, this section first ties the lessons learned from Chapters II through V through a coherent *bedtime* story about the birth and death of Ram—a personification of religious nationalism—before summarizing the political themes and their significance for *daytime* analysts. The story of Ram brings out all the themes encountered in the previous chapters—hatred, revenge, honor, and dignity during the rise; and bitterness, indifference, independence, individualism, and freedom during the fall—and is therefore relevant. Let us come full circle on the story of Ram around whose disputed birthplace the RJB conflict took place. As explained later, Ram’s story, in some ways, can be seen as a microcosm of the RJB-centered Hindutva campaign of the late 1980s and early 1990s in India.

Once upon a time there lived a powerful Hindu king called Dasharath in Ayodhya. All he wanted was a son. Unfortunately, his main wife who was the queen could not conceive. So Dashrath sought the help of powers greater than a king. He called on Vishwamitra and other sadhus to use their religious and moral authority to ask Gods to deliver him a son. They saw this as good opportunity to help drive out demons who always interfered with sadhus’ prayers in the forests. The sadhus somehow convinced Gods that their kingdom on earth and Ayodhya were in danger and that they must send

someone to save mankind. The Gods asked Lord Vishnu, the sustainer of the world order, to act. Vishnu sent Dashrath a magical fruit that had the magical property of producing children. The fair-minded Dashrath divided the fruit equally between his eldest and his favorite wives. Those two, in turn, gave half of their share to the ruling queen. When all the queens and when all the wives had eaten the fruit, four children were born. Ram was born to the eldest wife, his brother Lakshman was born to Dashrath's favorite wife, and Bharat and Shatrughan were born to the reigning queen who had received only a little of the magical fruit. Thus came Ram to save God's kingdom on earth and save mankind as told.

But Ram did not really understand why exactly he had been called and who his enemies were. The sadhus had been responsible and they convinced Ram that there were demons out there who did not let them worship Vishnu, Ram's father. The son of God became angry. He, along with his other brothers, decided to become warriors.

The test of Ram's skill as a warrior came when he was asked to lift a bow—when all princes had failed—as a condition to marry a beautiful woman called Sita. Ram, being the son of God after all, lifted the bow effortlessly and won Sita. When Dashrath was on his death-bed, people in Ayodhya expected Ram and Sita to become the king and queen. But one of Dashrath's queens, Kaikeyi, who had also eaten the magical fruit and who had given birth to Bharat, was goaded by her evil servant Manthara to make Dashrath honor a pledge he had given Kaikeyi to ask for whatever she wanted. Kaikeyi ordered Ram and Sita to be exiled in the forest for fourteen years, and asked her son Bharat to become the king of Ayodhya. Torn between his love for his mother and his brother Ram, Bharat took up the throne in a symbolic way only.

Ram went into exile with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman. The sadhus convinced him that there was a demon called Ravan who was responsible for all the trouble in the world. It was Ravan who had destroyed temples and it was Ravan and his followers who troubled sadhus all the time. They filled Ram's ears with hatred and asked Ram to take revenge for the honor and dignity of the worshippers of Vishnu, Ram's un-incarnate form in the heavens. Ravan, on the other hand, wanted to take revenge from Ram because Ram and Lakshman had insulted his sister Suparnakha who had been attracted to them for their beauty. Ravan changed his form and disguised himself as a sadhu and kidnapped Sita. Ram and Lakshman were heartbroken and went on a long search for Sita. They found help in the monkey god Hanuman and his followers, all devotees of Lord Vishnu, who told Ram all about Ravan. With the help of Hanuman, Ram attacked Ravan and his kingdom Lanka. Lanka was burnt down and destroyed. With nothing left to do Ram, Sita and Lakshman went back to Ayodhya. Bharat gave up his throne and Ram became the new king of Ayodhya.

The victory was short. A common washerman in Ayodhya wanted to know if Sita had remained loyal to Ram during her stay in Lanka with Ravan. He asked Ram to tell him and the people of Ayodhya if Sita was still pure. Ram did not know how to convince people and Vishwamitra and other sadhus were of no help because their enemy Ravan had been killed and they were no more interested. Ram appealed to them but each sadhu went his own way. Ram also became indifferent because he had to show people that he

was fair and was not taking his wife's side. Sad and insulted, Sita appealed to her father, Earth, who swallowed her within itself. Sita gave birth to two sons, Luv and Kush. Raised by sadhus, Luv and Kush became freedom-loving sadhu-like warriors. They roamed independently like free birds in the forests. One day they came across a horse running wild. The young and independent sadhu-like warriors caught the horse and stopped it from destroying the forest. It was much later that they learnt that the horse was Ram's royal horse, who had let it loose to conquer new lands and expand his tiny kingdom in Ayodhya. His own sons had betrayed him, just like he had betrayed his own wife. Dejected and sad, Ram disappeared, like his wife had done earlier, and went back to the heavens, waiting to be called by sadhus when the world was in trouble again.

Let us transform the characters in the Ram story above. Substitute Vishnu for Indian history, Dashrath for political leaders, and Ram for Hindu nationalism in the story—Ravan for Muslims; Lanka for Ramjanmabhoomi; Hanuman for Hindutva supporters; Bharat for Congress; Sita for Hindu culture, and the washerman for democratic forces; and Vishwamitra, Luv and Kush representing sadhus who helped in the rise and fall of Ram—and you will get a sense of why this story about good and evil continues to be popular with Hindus. Just as the childless Dashrath had approached sadhus for help, so had BJP and VHP sought sadhus to give birth to Hindu nationalism. And when Hindu nationalism appeared in the form of Ram, sadhus used Ram for their own agenda as well. Just as the sage Vishwamitra raised and trained Ram as a warrior, so also sadhus infused Hindutva campaign with violent imagery—a trend that led to the destruction of Ravan's or Babri mosque. The schism between Ram and Sita towards the end of the story mirrors the increasing rupture between the Hindutva campaign and democracy. And just as Sita's children, the young sadhu warriors Luv and Kush had reined in Ram, so also sadhus themselves checked and splintered the rise of Hindu nationalism. Hatred against Ravan; revenge against Ravan as well as Ram; honor and dignity at stake; the indifference of Ram and sadhus towards the end; and the independence and freedom of the sadhus Luv and Kush in the downfall—illustrated recurrent themes encountered in the thesis.

As the Ram story shows, sadhus and ascetic warriors—such as Vishwamitra, Luv, and Kush—played an independent role in both engendering religious nationalism, in bringing Ram to earth to save Hindu religion; and in its fall, by distancing themselves from Ram when he needed them to prove Sita's loyalty, and reigning him (his royal horse) in towards the end of the story.

B. The Essential and the Multiple Identities of Sadhus

Theoretically, the thesis highlighted the identity of sadhus as a powerful independent variable in trying to understand the relationship between religion and politics. I showed how the three conventional models used to understand that relationship—represented by Peter Berger, Marty Appleby, and Greenfeld in Chapter I—can be enriched by understanding the independent role of religious actors, and in the unity and splintering of religious-based collective action. In contrast, the authors reviewed in Chapter I focus far more on structural or agent-independent social forces that engender nationalism. Although not reviewed in Chapter I, even important works of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson emphasize the necessity of nationalism—as opposed to agents—through standardization of universal or common forms of communication and education as societies modernize through specialization and technical division of labor.²⁴⁸ My argument about the rise and splintering of (Hindu) nationalist focuses more on the identity of religious actors than broad sociological forces.

Empirically, the thesis has provided a unique glimpse inside the minds of sadhus to help explain the rise and splintering of sadhus' collective action and its relationship with Hindu nationalism. It constitutes a rare attempt to interview the prime movers and dissenters among the sadhu community over two periods of time, fifteen years apart.

The analysis showed both the passionately held views of sadhus that helped them band together to bring down the mosque in 1992, and propel the BJP to national power. The analysis has also shown a tiered set of factors that help explain the subsequent splintering – *outside* events and institutions, divergent views and divisions *among* sadhus, and individual traits *within* sadhus.

The last constitutes a particularly unique glimpse inside the minds of sadhus to explain their fierce independence and desire to be free, that prevents them from making long term commitments to political parties and bosses, or accepting diktats from them. As this thesis showed sadhus' individualism or their desire to remain independent were the very reasons that made them leave home to become sadhus in the first place. Barring one, none of the sadhus

²⁴⁸ See, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Cornell University Press, 1983; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1993.

became sadhus to do socially and politically useful things. Thematically, “freedom from” or “freedom of” were found to be the anchors of a sadhu way of life. In conversation after conversation in Chapter V, sadhus strongly stressed that they were not attached to or belong to any political party. Even the few sadhus who were involved in politics as members of parliament, either distanced themselves from BJP, or routinely emphasized their independence as free thinkers.²⁴⁹ Although the Hindu ethos common to BJP and sadhus may suggest a “natural” organizational affiliation between the two, that was not the case in the most concrete and explosive case to have hit India after Independence.

Theoretically, this thesis focuses on the identity of a specific type of actors, who can best be summarized as “spiritual agents.” The “spiritual” aspect connotes their passionate commitment to a transcendental cause or higher calling—or, as Max Weber put it so famously, a commitment to the “magic of orthodoxy”—yet which is not aligned in any rigid way to a particular political party or organized religious institution, such as the church. The “agent” aspect reinforces this notion of free-wheeling, individualistic actors who are not committed to any particular institution. Freedom, individualism, and commitment to transcendental causes or to the “magic of orthodoxy” accord a high degree of moral authority to such spiritual agents that can shape political outcomes under certain conditions.

At the heart of my working hypothesis and the theoretical argument presented earlier is also the concept of the term “sadhu” itself. *Etymologically*, a sadhu is one who renounces “noise” and distractions around him, and, in a silent and meditative (*sidhha*) way, hits the spiritual or transcendent target (the *sadhya*) in the most efficient way. In a *theological* sense, a sadhu renounces attachments to this world and seeks liberation from the cycle of rebirth. In relational terms, he is what a householder is not, and in being so, he renounces the caste system (and even his religion) with its elaborate purity rules affecting behavior, commensality, dress, marriage and many other details of life. At an *empirical* level, however, sadhus have elaborate relations with communities, temples, teaching institutions, and the like, if only to provide the laity an object of merit making through their donations. *Historically*, sadhus have been involved in politics, occasionally even in militant ways (see Chapter II). Chapter II also reveals the image of sadhus

²⁴⁹ For example, while Uma Bharati left BJP to start her own political party, Sakshiji Maharaj also left BJP and started making overtures towards BJP’s arch rival, the Samajwadi Party.

as warriors of the spirit, who, as the gods in Hindu iconography, are supposed to bear arms to be used during times of crisis. In Chapter III I introduce four key 19th century sadhus who played significant roles in social and political reform. In the 20th century, a number of sadhus became social workers in the Gandhian movement, and Congress party made use of sadhus as mobilizers. *Morally*, the term sadhu can also just mean an honest and pure person. Some sadhus interviewed dismissed the politically active ones as not real sadhus because they were attached to a cause.

These different meanings of what a sadhu is become relevant in the analysis of the interviews as the sadhus switch the referent. But central to my argument is the core meaning of detachment from the world in the sense of personal freedom, individualism, and commitment to transcendental causes. It is for this reason that sadhus so easily moved away from the Hindutva political movement of the BJP, RSS and VHP in the late 1990s.

What then are the implications of this analysis? Theoretically, this suggests the need to understand the identity and autonomous role of religious leaders in political fundamentalist movements in all their variety. In the context of Indian politics, we found that the common identity of sadhus as individualistic and independent freedom seekers helped temper Hindu fundamentalist tendencies. The analysis suggests that, like the famed crouching serpent in Hindu Kundalini Yoga, sadhus constitute a latent but potent political force ever ready to rise, strike, and recoil.²⁵⁰ Given a contingent event, in this case, of opening of the locks of the Ram temple, they rose because of the significance of deeply-held causes (the religious significance of Ram and the desire to undo historical wrongs perpetrated by Muslim rulers to the Ram temple).

The fragmentation within the sadhu community—driven by the commonalty among sadhus—is further reinforced by the well-known fact that sadhus are not organized in a single church, following one “Pope” and one “Book”. As we saw in Chapter V, sadhus from the same religious

²⁵⁰ On the serpent (also called naga) symbolism. Nagas, in the Hindu mythological tradition, live in the infernal world, and their king, the *Shesh Nag*, is the home for Lord Vishnu, the sustainer of the world. The Shesh Naga cannot strike because the equilibrium of the universe that rests on its head will destabilize and lead to cosmic destruction. But the naga’serpent that Lord Shiva wears around his neck, during battles between good and evil, *does* strike. In the Kundalini Yoga, the most primordial energy, in the form of a coiled serpent, lies at the base of a person’s seat (lower end of the spine). It is coiled and dormant. When aroused through certain contingent events and techniques, that most potent spiritual energy rises towards the head and becomes potent for a while before recoiling again. In the Shakta/Tantrik religious tradition, this serpent symbolism is as a euphemism for having a “spiritual” internal orgasm, where the semen rises upwards and inwards, instead of downwards and outwards.

community (Ramnareshacharya and Lal Das, for instance) held widely divergent views on religious issues and political parties. And although there are many religious heads and many religious texts in the sadhu community, the commitment to remain independent and free—the very reasons that made them become sadhus—far overshadows any doctrinal or other injunctions from any source. Their commitment to certain transcendent and religious causes—and the uncivility that may follow from it—seems to acquire a fundamentalist flavor. However, as the statements of most sadhus in Chapter V show, such commitments imply long-term commitments to political parties, a prospect that makes the independent and freedom seeker sadhus go back to the sanctity of their hermitages and the hustle and bustle of the religious market.

Under what conditions will the Hindu serpent strike again? Was sadhu’s activism a one-time affair, and if not what is the significance of sadhus in politics generally?

C. Sadhus as a political force

To be honest, I cannot say for sure when the serpent will strike again. Sadhus have long agitated against practices like cow slaughter and religious conversion of Hindus by Muslims and Christian missionaries. Yet, none of those campaigns had any major political implication. In contrast, sadhus in the RJB campaign managed to elevate BJP at a national level and helped break almost four decades of Congress hegemony. Besides sadhus, all the external players had been around, but the RJB campaign was the first time that sadhus both helped in the rise and in the splintering of a RJB-centered Hindu nationalist cause. While contingent events helped, the answer to the question about the uniqueness of the RJB campaign lies perhaps in the intensity of convergence among sadhus, BJP, and the VHP. Given the fact that none of these actors were politically active before the mid 1980s—not busy and not spread out enough—they managed to act collectively in an intense and efficient way, without the responsibilities that are associated with running a government and maintaining an entrenched political party. *In short, they acted collectively like a sadhu—free from responsibilities, straight towards their avowed and concrete goal, the Ramjanmabhoomi temple.*²⁵¹ Once BJP had come to power, it turned to the numerous

²⁵¹ As pointed out earlier, etymologically the word “sadhu” refers to the idea of attaining a goal as efficiently and directly as possible in a manner where external factors do not act as diversions and where internal turbulences do not

responsibilities of governance, It was no longer a partner in the “collective sadhu force” constituted earlier by itself and the sadhus.

Theoretically, sadhus as spiritual agents are committed to transcendental causes and have aspirations to act upon them and realize goals that flow from those commitments; yet they don't want to get tied down to a particular institution in pursuit of these causes. But there are some rare moments in history when contingent events help provide a platform for them to come together around the shared transcendental cause and galvanize them into collective action for the duration of the contingent event. Yet, when fissures appear in this contingent coalition or when there are other exogenous pressures or events, the spiritual agents lose patience, disengage or simply move on to their individual spiritual pursuit, consistent with their free-wheeling individualistic nature. In this sense, spiritual agents with shared transcendental values constitute a powerful latent force in politics that can come together and disband, depending upon the platform provided by contingent events.

Given the identity of sadhus as spiritual agents driven by freedom, individualism, and commitment to transcendental causes, the politically active Hindutva sadhus formed a unique ephemeral coalition, and I argue that sadhus in general will only form ephemeral coalitions in principle. *If reluctance to make long-term political commitments undermines sadhus' political effectiveness, then we must look to symbolic means for their significance. These are to be found in their dramatic presence in the ritual processes of the pilgrimage/political processions (or yatras)—employed successfully by the VHP and BJP—in their role as avengers of historical wrongs dealt to Hindus, and on their focus around sacred places of greater status than any other sacred place in the world.*

Sadhus' discourse on equalitarianism and a caste-less society also has a profound political significance. While BJP played upon the anxieties of the upper castes and business middle classes who feared Indian forms of affirmative action that favor the poorer sections and lower castes, sadhus delicately straddle the tension between their identity as renouncers and being members of a highly inegalitarian caste-based society.

create doubts. Such a deliberate focused act of a sadhu bears strong resemblance with the gathering of energy and striking in the Zen philosophy.

Having left the life of a householder to pursue a life centered on Hindu religion and spiritualism, it is not surprising to find a high level of passion among sadhus for conservative Hindu causes. Politically, one may frame this simultaneous allegiance towards individualism/freedom and conservatism as representative of a unique strain of unstable or ephemeral political fundamentalism. Based on secondary data described in Chapter II, one way for sadhus to sustain this disequilibrium is to draw upon the powerful symbolism of sadhus in the popular imagination—a tapestry of enigmatically contradictory images that transcends political boundaries and that has a unique sway over the Indian mind. We found the superiority of this popular image of sadhus over the elitist one represented by the four “giants” in Chapter III, whose ideas straddled the entire Left-Right political spectrum. It is for such reasons that the political activism of sadhus does not resemble the standard political fundamentalisms described in Chapter I. *As a political force sadhus represent a somewhat universal longing of the heart—to become and remain free—and the terse commitment to transcendental and Hindu cause that animates their conservatism.* Given this radical form of freedom and individualism that sadhus display, the charge of sadhus being “reactionary” and “anti-modernity” misses the deeper point about the vibrant coexistence of freedom/individualism and conservatism that can take different forms based on contingent political events.

Compared to other kinds of religious fundamentalisms—such as Islamic, Christian, and Jewish—sadhu-led Hindu fundamentalism, precisely because it is ephemeral, has a potentially dangerous element to it, despite sadhus’ apparent quest for individual freedom. It takes a long time for scattered forces represented by free-floating sadhus to galvanize and unite; but when they do, they exercise their legendary moral and symbolic authority to strike ephemerally, but in a focused, efficient, and a forceful way. The wrath of the sadhus, their legendary role as characters capable of blessing as well as placing a curse, feeds into the image of unorganized sadhus as a political force that, although not potent all the time, is one that is always capable and ready to strike like a serpent if aroused and disturbed. So while sadhus may be used by political parties to achieve their own political ends, this thesis has argued that sadhus also act as independent forces that can shape political outcomes on their own.

Having elevated BJP to the national level, BJP and VHP are busy in a political sense, making political coalitions, fighting elections, and running state governments. If my analysis is correct,

it is difficult to expect a strong and focused alliance between sadhus and the Hindu nationalist forces that will mobilize people and raise passions in the manner in which it happened during the RJB movement. Sadhus and the BJP combine acted in a focused way as a collective sadhu writ large. Left out in the cold, now, sadhus will continue to play their roles and provide services as described in Chapter II. While remaining a symbol of religious and moral authority, they also will continue to stand out as those who actually acted on the common aspiration to be free, with hands in water and head high above it. Even during “normal” times they will continue to stand out, visible, ever ready to rise above the water, strike, and go back with their hands in water and heads in the sky.

D. Sadhus, and Religion and Politics

Tying together the story lines from Chapter II and III it seems that sadhus are traditionally apolitical but as sadhuism evolved they become political actors in their own right. We saw sadhus playing an increasingly important role as religious nationalism starts to become a strong political force, from a minor event in 1949 in Ayodhya to its nationwide repercussions in 1986. While all the three religion-politics models outlined in Chapter I—use or misuse of religion in competitive politics, religion as a marker for political friends and foes, and role of religion in political theater—made sense up through events leading to the destruction of the mosque, none of them adequately accounted for the splintering of sadhu unity. In Chapter V, I examined the issue empirically by looking at the religious actors themselves as independent variables. I tried to step inside the minds of sadhus themselves to understand their unique and causal role in the rise and splintering of Hindutva, and explored that relatively unexplored idea, to show how the identity of religious actors may become a powerful independent variable in trying to explain the treacherous relationship between religion and politics.

One major observation—stressed repeatedly by sadhus in Chapter V—was the fact that they were concerned less about religion and more about Dharma. According to sadhus of all political stripes, Dharma implied values that bind society into an integral whole and also what constitutes the essential identity of any given object (for example, to burn is the dharma of a flame). The Dharma of the nation, seen in this perspective, is solidarity based on commonly

shared values by members of the nation. Religion, by contrast for sadhus, refers to different modes and traditions of worship and theology. While sadhus seem very liberal in the coexistence of different religions in a nation, they appear fairly dogmatic about a common Dharma animating the essential identity of the nation, which, not surprisingly, in a country like India has a Hindu flavor.

So although this distinction between Dharma and religion does not get sadhus off the hook for what many engendered as independent religious leaders during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the thesis does open up research agendas on how different religious leaders perceive religion in the first place and why they think that Dharma and they themselves may be in danger from competitive political developments. Sadhus' stress on religious nationalism, therefore, seems to also mask a deeper concern about a nation where freedom of exercise of individual and collective rights may appear to outdo the cherished independence and freedom of sadhus themselves.

One aspect of the relationship between religion and politics may be explored by asking the following question. What is the role of sadhus in creating modern hatreds between different religious communities, hatreds that then spill into the political arena? Theoretically, their role as individualistic and free spiritual agents who are committed to transcendental causes, may imply a general reluctance to take active part in communal violence. Historically sadhus have rarely participated in an organized way in such events. Not surprisingly, even in recent expressions of vitriolic Hindu nationalism led by the followers of *Bajrang Dal*, the militant youth wing of the VHP—particularly during the Hindu Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002, or in the anti-Christian rampage in 2008 following the murder of a *sadhu*—sadhus have kept their distance. At the same time, one cannot discount the effect of the incendiary anti-Muslim speeches by Uma Bharati and Sadhavi Rithambara. This ambiguous or contradictory image of a sadhu—saintly on the one hand and highly divisive on the other—flows from their ephemeral association with an organization (the RSS, VHP, and BJP combine) which, in this case, had revealed its sustained hatred against Muslims since 1925 when the RSS was formed. Interestingly, as was widely known in Ayodhya even during the RJB conflict, the sadhu Ramchandra Paramhans, who initiated the RJB campaign and who was the main party in the legal court cases over the RJB issue, was found walking hand in hand with his best friend, the Muslim representative in the

same case. Given the moral image of sadhus as simple and honest persons, and given the moral sway and authority they have over the popular imagination, they can spread poison by striking like the serpent, but only to recoil thereafter.

E. Political Significance of the Thesis, Restated

The working hypothesis stated earlier asserts that it is the inherent common identity of sadhus as sadhus that contributed to the rise and subsequent splintering of RJB-centered Hindu nationalism, but which ultimately also tempers (Hindu) fundamentalist tendencies. In other words, it was the commonality among sadhus as free and independent spiritual agents with commitment to common transcendental causes that was the decisive factor.

As I went through the popular images of sadhus (Chapter II) and the influence of individual religious elites on nationalism and Hindu nationalism (Chapter III), the political role of these charismatic “deviants” become clearer. Their alleged powers to bless and put curse upon others, and to shock and scandalize, were so legendary that when they united temporarily against a common enemy, they were able to monopolize political discourse in a manner not possible by sadhus as individual religious entrepreneurs. They became the quintessential malleable political force that could unite but splinter as well, and give birth to, as an unintended consequence as they did in the late 20th century, a Hindu nationalist awakening and engender a deepening of democracy as far as electoral politics was concerned.

As I indicated earlier, the rise of the Hindu-nationalist BJP party in the 1990s in some ways actually helped “deepen” the democratic culture of India, and not merely in a populist mode. It helped break the almost four decades of Congress monopoly and gave expression to religious as opposed to purely secular sentiments of the Indian voters. It also gave voice to a small group of sadhus among the four to five million sadhus in a country of about one billion people. This thesis focused on a small but ideologically, symbolically, and, for a brief moment, politically significant set of religious leaders—the sadhus, who helped mobilize the victory of the BJP to become the majority opposition party at the center in 1991, and as the ruling party in 1996, 1998—1999, and from 1999 to 2004 (besides chief minister-ship of several states). The numbers of the highly visible and rhetorically strident sadhus in this movement was small but served as

the public face of the movement. Since the movement had been precipitated by a contingent event, the opening of the locks of the RJB temple—an act on the part of Congress leader Rajiv Gandhi to appease Hindus following an earlier appeasement of Muslim clerics—sadhus helped energize a vibrant political debate over the nature of the secular state in India and what a ruling non-secular party might mean for the future of the secular state.

After coming to power BJP softened its extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric and distanced itself from the single agenda of the Ram temple, turning instead to issues of governance, liberalization, and middle-class expansion. However, it continued to pursue, at various times, nationalist agendas, like the building of the nuclear bomb as a sign of Indian pride. With BJP functioning alongside Congress as a normal political party—voted in power through democratic processes—what is the role that religion and sadhus might be expected to play as democracy deepens and matures?

What I have suggested through the serpent metaphor is that, given favorable contingent events or conditions, sadhus will rise and strike and recoil thereafter. They will only form ephemeral coalitions around common transcendental or religious causes; and their impact would be potent because of their strong commitment and their moral authority. An equally strong urge to remain independent and free forces sadhus to make efficient and focused use of their ephemeral unity, because long-term commitment and association with a political organization will undercut their desire to remain free and independent. The unity would splinter. If my analysis is correct, there is little prospect of sadhus uniting with BJP that is now into the protracted business of running for elections and involved in normal governance. While the party's rise has deepened the democratic political culture, religion and sadhus must wait for a political party to become as committed, focused, and free as sadhus are before making a difference to the further deepening of democracy. Political issues, such as the right form of secularism in a multi-religious society and the appropriate role of sadhus in politics, will remain contested. Given an appropriate platform, sadhus are bound to raise such issues about religion and politics in a democratic way, with a tinge of fundamentalism no doubt. That “tinge” is an extension of their identity as free, independent, and committed spiritual agents.

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APPENDIX I

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AYODHYA AND THE RAMJANMABHOOMI TEMPLE

The Ramjanmabhoomi (RJB) temple at the center of the conflict is located in the town of Ayodhya in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). According to Peter van der Veer:

Some 120 kilometers from [the capital city] Lucknow, lies the rather unimpressive and dusty town of Ayodhya. Coming from Lucknow by rail one first passes Faizabad, an important junction, where many passengers leave or board the train. Only ten minutes after leaving Faizabad the train arrives in Ayodhya. It is a large station, but usually only a few people get out here. The need for such a large station becomes apparent only on those occasions when trainloads of passengers have Ayodhya as their destination. Ayodhya is a *tirtha*, a Sanskrit word we usually translate as ‘place of pilgrimage.’ Most visitors are pilgrims, who make the journey to Ayodhya, and also often to other tirthas, for religious reasons; a *tirth yatra* as they say in India. On some occasions hundreds of thousands of them arrive together in Ayodhya, but in general they come in small parties with their own means of conveyance—a hired bus, a reserved compartment in the train, or, if they are rich enough, a car. The vast majority of the pilgrims are Hindus and the reason for their visit becomes clear as soon as one looks at the architecture of the station. It has been built in the form of a Hindu temple, and over the entrance is a depiction of the divine couple, Ram and Sita, together with Ram’s brother Lakshman. Ayodhya is the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram and the place where spent an important part of his earthly life. It is therefore a place where his presence can be constantly felt, a sacred environment.²⁵²

While Ayodhya has many Hindu temples—besides mosques, Buddhist shrines, and Jain temples—the fort area called Ramkot and the Hanumangarhi temple within it are the most important places for Ram devotees; and the central place of Ramkot is Ramjanmabhoomi, the disputed birthplace of Ram where the RJB temple and Babri mosque stand (see map below). The addendum to the map consists of some the more well known temples listed often in tourism brochures. Although there is a constant stream of devotees who visit Ayodhya, devotees flock

²⁵² Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: The management of Religious experience and identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 1.

more during particular festivals and auspicious times. More importantly—and that is particularly true with Hindus—no one temple or a few among the hundreds of temples are the sole objects of a devotee’s attention. In fact the holy bathing ghats—and again there are several in Ayodhya besides the more prominent ones like *Svargadvar Ghat, Ram Ghat, Lakshman Ghat, Naya Ghat, Vasudev Ghat, and Janaki Ghat*—are patronized as much as temples.

Peter van der Veer summarizes the legend or myth associated with Ayodhya and Ram:

[Ramjanmabhoomi] was . . . lost at the end of Treta-yuga,²⁵³ but it was rediscovered in our time [the Kali yuga] by the famous [Hindu] King Vikramaditya. . . . Legend has it that this [Ayodhya] was the first place Vikramaditya managed to see when he went out to search for the place of Ram. Initially all he knew about Ayodhya was that it was to be found on the bank of the Sarayu [river]. He made his camp and rode around on his horse. On one of his journeys he came across a man on a black horse. He was dressed like a king, but totally black. Vikramaditya saw the man descending from his horse and taking a bath in the Sarayu. When he emerged from the Sarayu this man had become totally white, to the utter astonishment of Vikramaditya. He drew his horse up in front of the stranger and asked him who he was and how he had changed from black to white. The man answered that he was Prayag, the king of tirthas, and that he had become black by absorbing the sins of so many sinners. By coming here and taking a bath he had become white again. Vikramaditya was naturally surprised that the most important tirtha Prayag could wash his sins in this place and so asked him what kind of greatness (*mahima*) it was that made such a thing happen. Prayag answered that the place where they were standing was Gopratar, where Ram had left the world. Vikramaditya was pleased to hear that he was now near Ayodhya and he asked if Prayag knew more about the city. The king of tirthas then showed him all the sites, beginning with the place where Ram was born. Vikramaditya drew a line around it to make sure he would remember it.

[Later] Vikramaditya was not able to find the line he had drawn. Dejected by this misfortune, he sought the help of a [sadhu] yogi who was in deep meditation nearby. When this yogi came out of his meditation he told the king that it was not easy to ‘realize’ the birthplace of Ram. Mere directions to its geographical location would not suffice. Some special procedure was necessary to and that was the reason that Vikramaditya could not find the line again. To understand the secret [*rahasya*] of this place the raja should utter constantly (*jap*) the Ram mantra. He should also let a calf

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 5. *Treta yuga* forms one of four *yugas* in the Hindu conception of cosmic time. According to Peter van der Veer, the “Hindu cosmogony the cosmos passes through cycles within cycles, for eternity. . . . The basic cycle is the *kalpa*, a ‘day of Brahma’ or 4,320 million earthly years. His night is of equal length. . . . In each cosmic day the god creates the universe and again absorbs it . . . where it remains as a potentiality. Within each *kalpa* are fourteen . . . secondary cycles. . . . In these periods the world is recreated, and a new *Manu* appears, as the progenitor of the human race. . . . Each [secondary cycle] contains seventy-one *Mahayugas*, or aeons, of which a thousand form a *kalpa*. Each *Mahayuga* is in turn divided into four *yugas*, called *Krita, Treta, Dvapara*, and *Kali*. Each *yuga* represents a progressive decline in piety, morality, strength, stature, longevity and happiness. We are at present in the *Kali yuga*.”

together with other cattle roam in this area. When the calf came across the [Ram] Janmabhoomi, milk would drip immediately from its udders. As a result of such a demonstrative incident no one could ever doubt that this was really the birthplace of Ram. The king did as he was told and at midday on Ram Naumi [the birthday of Ram] the calf began to shed milk at a certain place. There Vikramaditya a temple of shaligram stone (black fossils, emblem of Ram) and he installed an image of the infant Ram.²⁵⁴

Peter van der Veer goes on to show how the RJB place attracted both Hindu and Muslim ascetics. According to him:

Also lay people of both religions brought their sons to the place in the belief that this visit would extend the life-span of the child, a custom that is observed to this day by pilgrims from all directions. In the sixteenth century a Muslim saint with the name Khwaja Fazal Abbas Ashikhan came to the temple and became a *sadhak shishya* (a disciple who wants to learn some methods for meditation, etc.) of the Hindu sadhu Syamanand. . . . Another faqir who came here was Jalal Shah. Impressed by the power of the place, he wanted to transform it into a Muslim centre. Both faqirs agreed that the temple should be destroyed and that a mosque should be built. When [the Muslim leader] Babar came to India with the intention of becoming its ruler, he visited Ayodhya and consulted these faqirs, who promised him that that when he should destroy the temple and build a mosque his desire would be fulfilled. Babar ordered his general Mir Baqi to carry out these instructions and then went on from Ayodhya to other places. Mir Baqi destroyed the temple, but his efforts to build a mosque failed because each night everything that had been built during the day fell down again. Then the faqir Khwaja dreamt that the mosque should not be built right over the garbha (sanctum) of the temple, but somewhat behind it. Thus the mosque was built in such a way that the garbha of the temple remained open to the Hindus for centuries in the form of a pit into which they could throw flowers.²⁵⁵

According to the stories told by many riverside Hindu priests (pandas) who line the religious bathing ghats in Ayodhya, “almost all temples [in Ayodhya] were destroyed by the Muslims who gradually became the most influential power in India in northern India from the twelfth century onwards. When Muslims disappeared from Ayodhya in the course of the eighteenth century, the heyday of Hinduism could begin. Those temples from Vikramaditya’s time which had been only partly demolished were repaired, while new ones were built at ‘old places’, traditionally connected with the Ram story.”

What remains today of such temples and places of religious significance to Hindus—among the main ones that are visited by pilgrims and listed in tourist brochures—are listed below:

²⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 19—20.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 20—21.

Temples and temple complexes:

Ramkot and Ramjanmabhoomi temple: Specially visited by domestic and foreign tourists during the day of Lord Ram's birth (March—April).

Hanuman Garhi: A temple complex with a fort-like architecture within the Ramkot area.

Nageshwarnath Temple: Built by Ram's son, Kush, in honor of Lord Shiva, Ram's favorite deity.

Mani Parbat: A Buddhist sanctuary that became a Hindu temple.

Mani Parbat and Sugriv Parbat: Ancient earth mounds identified with Buddhist history.

Treta ke Thakur: A temple associated with a final ritual performed by Ram as a king, and with idols of Ram, his wife, and his brother carved out a single block of black sandstone.

Kanak Bhawan: The main temple where Ram and Sita are shown as the ideal couple (wearing gold crowns).

Vijayraghav Temple: A temple where Ram is presented in twelve faces.

Bara sthaan and Choti chawni

Religious bathing ghats:

Swarg Dwar Ghat: Believed to be the place where Ram is said to have been cremated here.

Guptar Ghat: Believed to be the place where Ram left his body.

Janaki Ghat: Associated with Ram's wife, Sita.

Lakshman Ghat: Attributed to Ram's brother, Lakshman, where he voluntarily renounced his life.

Ram Ghat, Naya Ghat, and Vasudev Ghat

Maps of Uttar Pradesh and Ayodhya

(Source: Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: The management of Religious experience and identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.)

