300 Die as Hindus Fail to Repossess Temple Site
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Resolute - many say brutal - action by police prevented thousands of kar sevaks (religious workers) under the leadership of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) from tearing down the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, North India, on October 30th. Approximately 200,000 kar sevaks had been arrested at police roadblocks in a sixty-mile perimeter around Ayodhya. Thousands took foot paths through fields to circumvent the roadblocks and assembled in Ayodhya. Wearing orange headbands, the mostly teen-age group approached from three directions on the 30th to converge on the mosque. The Press Trust of India news agency reported that in many places sympathetic state police officers helped the kar sevaks to cross through barricades. Government officials said about 700 succeeded at entering the mosque, where they chipped away some bricks and plaster and planted orange flags on the dilapidated building's three domes. Police reinforcements soon chased them out, but not before some of the policemen themselves took advantage of the rare opportunity to worship at Rama's birthplace.

When steel-tipped bamboo lathis and tear gas failed to disperse the crowds, the police opened fire, killing at least 17, including some sadhus. One Associated Press report stated, "When the crowds rushed toward the mosque, Hindu holy men screamed obscenities from rooftops and pelted police with stones." A Swami Chinmayananda (not of Chinmaya Mission) had earlier been quoted by the Times of India as saying October 6th that, if necessary, the temple would be constructed with skulls instead of bricks. An initial group of 51,000 kar sevaks arrested outside of Ayodhya were armed with more than 35,000 tribal spears, tridents and other weapons. Those actually in Ayodhya were, however, not armed.

More Hindus were shot by police on subsequent days, and it is these killings - possibly numbering a hundred - which have raised the greatest outcry. One wounded kar sevak, Bhupendra Singh Rawat of New Delhi, said, "Two policemen dragged a man out of the house and shot him in the chest. They also shot two people who where crying over a dead body. They were shot in the back." Hospitals confirmed that single shots to the head were responsible for some of the deaths - indicating deliberate execution rather than firing to disperse crowds. Related riots

in other parts of India bring the death toll to 300.

On November 1st, Ashok Singhal, general secretary of the VHP told a crowd in Ayodhya, "There is no power on earth which can stop us from building the temple. There is no place for Islam in our nation." On the 4th Singhal called on the kar sevaks to end the siege. A public meeting is set for the November 11th in Delhi to consider future actions.

When news of the assault upon the mosque spread to Bangladesh, Muslim gangs attacked Hindus and Hindu temples in several cities. In Chittagong, the country's second largest city (and 30% Hindu), gangs armed with knives and clubs "attacked Hindu temples, smashed idols and set fire to hundreds of homes," according to the Associated Press. At least 11 temples have been broken into and 300 homes burned by the 2,000-person mob. One person was killed and 100 injured.

The latest round of events at Ayodhya began with the "Rathyatra" of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president and member of parliament Shri L.K. Advani. The political leader set out on a 6,000-mile trek from Somnath temple in Gujarat state through North India to Ayodhya in an air-conditioned truck decorated like a temple chariot. He began at Somnath as it like Ram Janma Bhoomi, had been converted to a mosque hundreds of years ago. But Somnath was reclaimed and reconverted to a Hindu temple shortly after India's independence. Advani's trek was cut short when he was arrested in Bihar state, leading to the BJP's withdrawal from the ruling coalition and Prime Minister Singh's likely fall. Arya Samaj leader Swami Agnivesh charged that the "BJP is creating religious pollution in the country by taking advantage of blind and traditional Hindus."

Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, wife of Dr. Swami Gitananda (head of Ananda Ashram in Pondicherry) echoed these remarks, "Religion [in India] had been thoroughly politicized, not by the Hindu themselves, but by politicians of all creeds, and particularly by the agnostic and atheistic politicians who seek only material gain and power."

Earlier in October Prime Minister Singh firmly decided to stop any assault on the site. "It is not a question of saving the government, but that of saving the nation," he said on October 21st. A temple or mosque could be built any time, but a nation

once divided could not be united, Singh told Indians in his TV broadcast. "If we accept polarization on the basis of religion, what moral ground would the government have to counter the demand for Khalistan or secession of Kashmir to Pakistan?" asked the prime minister.

It is difficult to say who will gain the most politically from the situation. The Washington Post reported, "some political pollsters and commentators here [in India] have predicted that fear of escalating instability will lead Indian voters back to the Congress Party led by former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, even though the party is in disarray and Gandhi has so far been unable to mount a political comeback since his ouster 11 months ago." The Congress Party has ruled India for most of the four decades since independence. The Post also reports that BJP activists "say they hope to benefit in any new election from religious and nationalist feelings generated by the Ayodhya dispute."

Like thousands of other mosques built during the Muslim invasions of India, the 450-year-old structure was almost certainly erected after the demolition of a temple marking the traditional site of Lord Rama's birthplace. Because of its emotional appeal to the Hindu public, it was selected as a test case to build the necessary political clout to regain this and several other Hindu sites in India presently occupied by mosques - most notably the birth-place of Lord Krishna in Mathura and the Kasi Vishvanath Siva temple in Benares.

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