



In Defence of Our *Dharma*

by Madhu Kishwar

THE ostensible success of the Ram Mandir Movement led by the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine is proof that the Nehruvian brand of secularism hitherto propagated in India found a very limited support base, confined mainly to sections of the English educated elite. Its appeal remained limited for good reasons. The liberal, secular intelligentsia is rooted more in the western liberal tradition and is often unable to comprehend, leave alone appreciate, the sentiments and cherished beliefs of India's diverse

peoples. Their attitude is often similar to that of the erstwhile colonial rulers who contemptuously dismissed the social, religious and cultural beliefs of the Indian people as superstitious mumbo-jumbo.

Today, a large body of Hindu opinion seems tired of the thoughtless and disrespectful critique of India's indigenous traditions and culture which has led to brutal neglect of indigenous learning and knowledge systems.

The deadening system of

education designed by the colonial rulers was meant to destroy the self respect of Indians. Yet the same self contempt is perpetuated in the modern education system that has produced generations of people alienated from and ignorant of India's traditions of culture and learning. The people who are joining the Ram Mandir movement in large numbers do so in the mistaken belief that they are thereby reviving the glory of India's cultural heritage. Their ignorance of their own heritage has made them vulnerable targets for

unscrupulous politicians who are using their genuine resentment for very harmful purposes.

The real agenda of the BJP is capture of state power for the purpose of implementing the politics of revenge. Even though they use the rhetoric of protecting the “Hindu way of life”, the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine has kept its followers deliberately ignorant of their cultural heritage. Like all fascists they know that the politics of hate and revenge needs to emphasize whatever will aggravate the Hindu’s low self esteem. Among my students and in my own neighbourhood I’ve asked some of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Ram Mandir campaign which version of the Ramayan they had read; I drew a blank. All these educated young people are familiar with nothing other than Ramanand Sagar’s T.V. serial Ramayan. Though they have heard of Tulsi Ramayan, almost none of them have read it. They are not even aware of the existence of different regional and community versions of the Ramayan. It is almost impossible to get them into a discussion on the great epic. There is only one aspect of the Ram Mandir movement that excites them—taking revenge on the Muslims. The Ram Mandir movement is grounded not in the love of Ram or Ramayan but in the hatred of Muslims.

The BJP-RSS-VHP Combine pretends to be outraged at the lack of respect for indigenous culture shown by the secularists among the western educated elite. However, they themselves are assiduously cultivating ignorance of India’s cultural and religious traditions with their deliberate distortions. This Combine is not rooted in any tradition of learning, Indian or foreign. For example, the University of Chicago has much better facilities for acquiring scholarship on the Ramayan than all of the educational or religious institutions associated with the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine put together. They

दंड जतिन्ह कर भेद जंह नर्तक नृत्य समाज
जीतहु मनहि सुनिअ अस रामचंद्र के राज ॥२२॥

In Ramachandra’s realm the only rods were those in the hands of ascetics, the only differences were those of tune and measure in the dancers’ troupes; the word ‘conquer’ was only heard to urge self conquest.

Tulsidas Ramayana: Vtara-Kand (22)

have not even striven to ensure that Indians need not go to foreign universities to study ancient Indian literature. They display much greater fascination with Hitler’s ideas and campaigns than with the Ramayan or other Hindu religious texts. They have no use for these texts, except to extract a few phrases out of context as tools for political propaganda. Therefore, they have never concerned themselves with the task of making such learning valued and respected in our universities.

I have vivid memories of the sense of outrage I experienced as an 18 year old, when I was a student of English Honours at Miranda House. I was rudely ridiculed by some of my fellow students who saw in my hostel room a copy of the Tulsi Ramayan published by the Geeta Press with a commentary in Hindi. For these students it was a symbol of backward looking religiosity fit only for semi literate grandmothers. Had it been an English rendering of the Ramayan brought out by some foreign university press my interest would have been seen as more respectable. Reading Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or even the English mystery and morality plays was considered a perfectly legitimate modern, secular activity. Only the ‘*behenjis*’ of the Sanskrit or Hindi Department—a supposedly backward lot—were expected to read Ramayan. These two departments were treated with visible contempt both by the students and faculty.

I was even more disappointed

when I found that even the Hindi speaking *behenjis* held the study of Ramayan and Mahabharat in similar disdain and preferred to read pulp romance novels by Gulshan Nanda and film magazines (except those doing Hindi and Sanskrit Honours who were compelled to study some of these texts as part of their curriculum.) It slowly became clear that the dominant elite in any society sets the norm for what is considered worth learning and respect. That is why the few among the English educated elite who gravitate towards a serious study of Indian literature, art and culture usually do so during their study stints at foreign universities and at times and places where such study is in fashion among Western intellectuals.

It is due to this ignorance that the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine can be so successful in manipulating Hindu sentiment. For example, in Ayodhya, there are several other temples that claim the honoured status of being built on the *Ram Janmasthan*. Yet this Combine insists that the controversial Babri Masjid site is the exact location of Ram’s birth. Ram is a revered religious figure, not a historical character. Ram’s date or place of birth cannot possibly be ascertained with accuracy. But the BJP Combine insists on reducing him to the status of someone who lived at a specific time at a specific place because they are desperate to model their belief system on Islam and Christianity, religions that emphasize the significance of offering a place and time of birth for their

B J P's Ramayan



These excerpts are translated and condensed from tapes of the speeches in Hindi delivered mainly by the B JP's UmaBharti, Member of Parliament. The cassette tapes are being sold commercially. They are being used extensively by the B JP propaganda machine in many parts of the country. The shrill, bloodthirsty tone of the hysterical voice pouring out hatred is strikingly similar to those we can still hear in the recordings of Nazi leaders at mass propaganda rallies.

The salient theme is that the only way Hindus can prove that they are not cowards is by initiating violent and murderous attacks on Muslims. These acts of aggression are presented as justified by the cruelties inflicted by some Muslim invaders who conquered parts of India.

The cassette is sold with a cover photo depicting Ramanand Sagar's Ram and Sita.

October 30 will decide your fate. On this day it will become clear whether the Hindus or Muslims will live in this country. You must be concerned about your future...

Throw off the cloak of cowardice and impotence. Learn to sing songs of valour and courage. Whoever wanted to rob, you let him. Your silence, decency and magnanimity were interpreted as cowardice...

Your strength has been divided. Unite across caste, province, language, breaking these three artificial walls...

Those who severed both the arms of Mother India—For those hypocrites there is no place here. They should leave this Bharat. This Hindustan is not theirs...

On October 30, by beginning the construction of the temple, our holy men will be laying the foundations of making Hindustan a Hindu *rashtra*.

Bharat Mata Ki Jai... Glory to Mahadev

Destroy the tyrant in the same way that Havana was vanquished. Do not display any love (*nij preet*). This is the order of Ram. Announce it boldly to the world that anyone who opposes Ram cannot be an Indian...

Muslims, remember Rahim who longed for the dust of Lord Ram's feet...

Songs of Hindu Muslim brotherhood were sung by Mahatma Gandhi. We got ready to hear the Azaan alongwith the temple bells, but they can't do this, nor does their heritage permit them to do so. It exhorts them to

organize themselves quietly in those places where they are in a minority. Where they are equal to those in other religions, they instigate riots. If Islam *rashtra* requires sacrifices, then they do not have to wait for the tomb or doomsday to reach heaven. The Koran exhorts them to lie in wait for idol worshippers, to skin them alive, to stuff them in animal skins and torture them until they ask for forgiveness. Our heritage enjoins repentance even if an ant is killed underfoot. The two cultures are polar opposites. But still we preached brotherhood, replaced *Vande Mataram* with *Jana Gana Mana*.

...How much have we sacrificed so that Hindu-Muslim brotherhood would continue! We even dismembered Mother India. Instead of Ram *dhwaj*, the symbol of Hindu martyrdom and sacrifice, we unfurled the tricolour, but this brotherhood eluded us...

Those [Muslims] who value their religion more than their nation, they can never be nationalists. And those who treat religion as a personal matter [Hindus] can never be communalists. Hindus cannot be communalists because those who give pride of place to their nation over their religion cannot be communalists.

The PAC youth tell me they are looking forward to October 30. They say when they were unemployed, they prayed to Bajrang Bali [another name for Hanuman, known

contd. on p. 6



founders, Prophet Mohammad and Jesus Christ. They want Ayodhya to become a Jerusalem.

Saving Religion From Politicians

Political leaders, not religious organisations, dominate the Ram Mandir campaign. I include VHP in the category of political organisations, as they are not even remotely concerned with the religious and spiritual well-being of the Hindus. Rather, they are obsessed with mobilising Hindus as a political force to subordinate and terrorise non-Hindus in India. Their *dharma* is nationalism, not Hinduism. Their inspiration comes from Hitler, not from Ram. Their cloak of piety notwithstanding, the real agenda of the VHP-RSS-BJP Combine is to breed more and more mistrust and hatred against Muslims. One hears their cadres openly proclaim: "We should do to Muslims what Hitler did to Jews." Slogans like "Pakistan ya Kabristan" are meant seriously, as is evident from the increasing incidents of massacres of Muslims such as in Bhagalpur, Meerut, Ahmedabad and now, Gonda. An essential first phase is to convince the people that Muslims should not be citizens unless they renounce their faith and slavishly support whatever the Combine requires.

Since the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine would find it hard to get endorsement among the vast majority of the people of India for this brand of murderous nationalism if they openly presented its real face, they have hijacked Ram and are using him as a political cover. Ram has been converted into a vote getter much in the same way as some parties use film stars. Newspapers tell us that Rs 700 crores have already been collected by this Combine. Much of the election expenses of the BJP are said to have been met by the money raised in Ram's name. Their *Rathyatra*

"You are Asking Too Many Questions"

The following account of the fairly typical conversation I had with a young English language journalist, who claimed to be a BJP supporter, demonstrates how even among certain sections of the English educated elite, the uneasiness with their rootlessness is making them easy prey to the machinations of hate mongering politicians. In response to his allegation that the Janta Dal government personified by V.P. Singh, was out to destroy India, I asked him:

Q. Who would you like to see as the next P.M. of India?

A. (Without a moment's hesitation) L.K. Advani.

Q. What are your reasons for this choice?

A. The BJP is the only party who openly talk of establishing a Hindu *rashtra* and putting the minorities in their place. The Muslims have been pampered too long and have become a threat to this nation.

Q. What will the Hindu *rashtra* do for Hindus? In other words, what is it that you wish to have for the Hindus with the establishment of BJP's Hindu *rashtra* which they can't have now? A. Hindus are not allowed to have their way of life in India the land of their own birth.

Q. By whom?

A. The government.

Q. What is it that you as a Hindu would like to do which you can't do without BJP's Hindu *rashtra*?

A. All the traditional knowledge of Hindus is being undermined. Even those branches of knowledge which are being hailed by the scientifically

superior West are not getting their due attention in India. For example, look at the neglect in our country of *yoga* and *ayurveda* as health care systems.

Q. What prevents the Hindus from pursuing these two branches of knowledge? I practice an hour of *yoga* every day. No Muslim comes to obstruct me. If I read the *Ramayan*, no Muslim or government insults me for it. If anyone prefers to go to an Ayurvedic centre as opposed to an allopathic clinic, no government penalises you. (He admitted he had never tried to learn *yoga* or *ayurveda*)

A. But there is no government support for these things. Therefore, they can't flourish. Under a *Hindu rashtra* there will be government support.

Q. But the erstwhile great *Voids* of this land did not work in government laboratories. The great sages and *gurus* did not need to chase government patronage, to ask the kings to allow them to tutor their children. The kings went to the *gurus* begging that their children be taught by them. If the BJP-RSS believe in promoting these branches of knowledge why don't they use the RSS *shakhas* as *yoga* centres instead of for fascist drills? Why don't they promote Ayurveda Research Centres, promote a sound health care system in the country, rather than jeopardise the lives of people and promote bloodshed?

A. I will have to think about it. You are asking too many questions. (Then, after a long pause) But I think state power is very important.

(contd. from p. 4)

for his devotion to Ram] for a job. Even after retirement they know they have to seek the protection of Ram. If the government orders them to fire, they will shoot, but it remains to be seen whether the bullets will hit Ram *bhakts* or pierce the chests of traitors of Ram. Though they are in uniform, the heart that beats in them is that of a Hindu. Though they are doing a job, the blood coursing in their veins is of a Hindu father.

Let this fire blaze magnificently. It was this feat of bloodshed that led to the dismemberment of the country, the death of so many Hindus... Let there be a conflagration rather than this slow torturous simmering...

We could not teach them with words, now let us teach them with kicks... Let there be bloodshed once and for all.

We have come out to strengthen the immense Hindu *shakti* into a fist...

You kept saying you will offer sacrifices. We will take thousands of sacrifices. Now we will not only shed our own blood, but the blood of others, too... That Mahatma Gandhi led you to ruin...

Tie up your religiosity and kindness into a bundle and throw it in the Jamuna *maiya*...

Leftists and communists ask me if we desire to turn this land into a Hindu *rashtra*. I say it was declared one at the time of Partition in 1947— Hindustan, a nation of Hindus and Pakistan, a nation of the Muslims. Those Muslims who stayed behind could do so because of the tolerance and large heartedness of the Hindus. Any non-Hindu who lives here does so at our mercy (*kirpa pe jee rahaa hai*). Declare without hesitation that this is a Hindu *rashtra*, a nation of Hindus. In future we have to prove that only those who honour Hindu womenfolk and holy men, believe in Hindu culture, Hindu history and gods and goddesses can stay in Hindustan.

The resolution passed by eminent leaders in Haridwar will remain unchanged. There will be no change, no compromise, on these issues:

a) the date of the construction of the Temple, October 30

b) the blueprint of the Temple; we will not tolerate any changes in it...

c) the site of the Temple, which will be raised where the present image of Sri Ram stands...

A senior journalist asked us: 'If we remain firm and uncompromising on these three issues, then what is there left to discuss?' We answered that there is the issue of whether these wishes will be granted gracefully or wrested by force...

Hindustan is foolish, it refuses to give up its foolish course, it gets beaten and forgives its opponent. Why? Because this is the land of Buddha and the Mahatma,

Guru Nanak Dev and other Sants who sacrificed their lives, offered their necks but could not break the neck of others...

This hate propaganda is verse is widely distributed at BJP-RSS-VHP rallies.

In Hindi the lines read...

गर्व से कहो हम हिन्दू हैं

भारत का संविधान बदल दो सन् 47 याद करो।
भारत भूमि पहले बंट चुकी मुसल्लों का बहिष्कार करो।।
औरंगजेब और बाबर बनकर अब कोई ना रहने पायेगा।।
अब वहीं रहेगा भारत में जो रहीम बन जायेगा।।
संविधान में भारत के वो वोट नहीं अब डालेगा।।
हिन्दू में हिन्दूओं की कृपा से बच्चे अपने पालेगा।।
जैसे हम कुरैत से अपने भाइयों को यहां लाये हैं।।
ऐसे हीं तुम यहां के मुसलमानों को तुम जहाजों में भरो।।
भारत का संविधान बदल दो सन् 47 याद करो।।
भारत भूमि पहले बंट चुकी मुसल्लों का बहिष्कार करो।।
जो हिन्दू हित की बात करेगा सत्ता में वही आयेगा।।
7 नवम्बर दूर नहीं है वी पी 30 वोट ही पायेगा।।
हिन्दू हिन्दू एक मत होकर भारत को आबाद करो।।
भारत का संविधान बदल दो सन् 47 याद करो।।
भारत भूमि पहले बंट चुकी मुसल्लों का बहिष्कार करो।।

English Summary:

Say with Pride, We are Hindus

Change the Constitution of India, remember 1947 when India was divided

Boycott Mussalmans

Now no one will be allowed to live here as an Aurangzeb or Babar

Now only those who can become Rahims can stay in India.

*Now under the Constitution they will not cast a vote
They will bring up their children in India at the mercy of the Hindus*

*Just as we brought our brothers from Kuwait
So also send off the Muslims in shiploads*

Only those who talk of Hindus' welfare will come to power...

Hindus should become of one mind and make India prosper...

was conducted on the lines of an election campaign, with Mr Advani presented as the prime ministerial candidate.

It is a matter of shame that as the *Rathyatra* travelled from town to town, most Muslims are reported to have felt the need to lock themselves up in their homes, not venturing to step out on the streets. They still felt unsafe, even behind locked doors, in their homes. Many, even in Delhi, fled their homes and sought shelter elsewhere, far from the yatra route. This is making a Ravan of Ram, instead of promoting reverence for him. The blood soaked temple they intend to build at Ayodhya on the rubble of a mosque would stand as a symbol of destruction of all the cherished ideals and norms of Hindu civilisation.

We need to redeem Ram as a religious figure, religious in the sense of representing a revered moral, ethical code and as an embodiment of rare spiritual ideals which have inspired generations and generations of people to upright lives in this land. The appropriation of Ram by sectarian politicians to perpetuate communal massacres pours contempt on Ram, who in popular imagination stands as a symbol of love, compassion (*patipavankripanidhan*) self sacrifice and

steadfastness to duty (*kartavyanishtha*). The Ram we imbibed as children from our parents bears no resemblance to the BJP-RSS incarnation. The Ram we know bore no malice even to those who did him wrong. He continued to love and respect Kaikeyi as his own mother even though she got him banished to fourteen years of forest wandering. We were taught that he triumphed over Ravan with moral force rather than through his superior skills as a warrior. His victory was foreshadowed when many of those close to Ravan, including Ravan's wife and brother, came to stand by Ram, for he represented righteousness. Today, the Combine leaders, though acting in Ram's name, are compelling many Hindus by their unworthy actions to oppose their politics, much as some of Ravan's well wishers were compelled to oppose Ravan.

Murderous Nationalism not Hinduism

The BJP projects Ram as a national warrior hero, as opposed to a Hindu God, in the mistaken belief that they are thus elevating Ram to a superior status. The reclaiming of what they call the Ram *Janmasthan* is not being justified on religious grounds but presented as a case of struggle

between nationalist and antinational forces, Babri Masjid is to be demolished because it was built by an invading outsider on the site of a Ram temple—with Ram presented as a national hero. Muslims are expected to join the Hindus in devotion to Ram to prove that they are not antinational. (See the extracts of Uma Bharti's speech pp. 4 and 6). They deliberately overlook the fact that even among Hindus there are innumerable sects whose chosen deities are other than Ram and who would feel no less offended if compelled to forsake their own form of worship as is being demanded of Muslims.

Many secularists see the BJP politics as promoting unhealthy religiosity. Nothing could be further from the truth. The BJP-RSS-VHP game is to selectively use Gods from the Hindu pantheon to practise their brand of murderous nationalism. Mr Advani and company are destroying all that is morally and spiritually elevating in Hinduism and forging from it a hate filled ideology of nationalism.

In our time far more murders have been committed in the name of nationalism than for the sake of any religion. The two world wars are a prime example. The war between Iran and Iraq, both Muslim countries, which has



Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, goes over to Rama and is given asylum



killed millions of people, is its most recent manifestation. Chauvinist nationalism cannot sustain itself without the notion of a hated other. It is invariably targeted against some other group. It thrives on the language of power and violence, not on the love of humanity. It has little respect for the human rights of even those people it seeks to unify as a nation. These types of nationalists are forever endangering the lives and well-being of their fellow nationals in the pursuit of power games as, for instance, Hitler and Khomeini did, and now Mr Advani is seeking to do.

By systematically building an atmosphere of hysteria among the Hindus they have caused frenzied clashes between the *kar sewaks* and the police, resulting in firing and deaths. The peaceful town of Ayodhya has been turned into a virtual battlefield. Instead of mourning those they mislead, those whose blood is on their hands, they are glorifying their victims as martyrs, encouraging more and more Hindus to a frenzied do-or-die mood.

Furthermore, their politics will make the lives of Hindus even more precarious in Punjab and Kashmir by providing greater legitimacy to the separatist politics of fundamentalist groups in the two states. The lives of Hindus in other countries, where they are in a minority, are also being seriously jeopardised. There are already many reports that Hindus are being attacked in Bangladesh and Pakistan. They may become even more vulnerable in the Gulf countries. In western countries, the prejudice against Indians may be further strengthened as reports of murderous strife in India reach those countries.

Gandhi's Hinduism Versus Advani's

The respectability accorded to nationalism is due to its mistaken association with anti-colonial

movements in third world countries. The vast difference between the two becomes evident if one compares Mahatma Gandhi's politics with that of Mr Advani and his friends in the RSS. The nationalism of the RSS asserted itself by actually murdering Gandhi then, and today it is as zealously trying to destroy all that Gandhi stood for. Gandhi's nationalism was based on his opposition to oppression of any group by another. He was essentially anti statist. He stood for the right of all the disadvantaged and oppressed groups (no matter what their religion) and against their exploitation by those who controlled state power. Mr Advani's nationalism, on the other hand, is desperate to grab hold of state power in order to subordinate all those within the country to his tyranny and to wreak vengeance on already vulnerable groups.

To achieve that end the nationalists build upon a culture of resentment, fear and hatred; the BJP Combine is encouraging Hindus to a false view of Muslims and other minorities as betrayers of the nation. One of their chief arguments is that Muslims had no right to stay in India after the creation of Pakistan.

As someone whose family was among the millions forcibly driven out of their homes in 1947, who had to migrate as refugees from the land that is now Pakistan, I share the anguish of the BJP-RSS at the criminal manipulations that led to the partition of India. However, they try to get people to forget how it came about. The chauvinist nationalism of the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha, which found support among large sections of the Congress as well, was a key reason for the success of Jinnah. It is ironical that the BJP-RSS Combine wish to fashion their politics in the Jinnah mould, a man they hate so much. In fact, the politics of both Jinnah and the BJP-RSS are

merely two sides of the same coin.

Those who hold that Muslims had no right to stay in India with the creation of Pakistan are seeking to model their politics on the pattern of the Muslim League. This amounts to vindicating Jinnah in a way that history did not. The groups who sought most actively the creation of Pakistan, the Mohajirs, find themselves treated like unwanted aliens in the nation state of their own making. Their language (Urdu), their culture, their connections with relatives in India, their lingering emotional attachment to the land of their birth and ancestors, are all suspect and under attack from the Muslim Punjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, Baluchis and others who exist so uneasily together in today's Pakistan. Despite the desperate attempts of the Muslim League and the army generals to weld the various groups in Pakistan into one nation based on religion, the ethnic strife in Pakistan is far more virulent today than before partition. The Baluchis, the Pathans, Sindhis, Punjabis and Mohajirs all seem to be locked in more deadly battles than raged on the continent in 1947. Human rights violations are even more severe in Pakistan than in India. The ruling elite of Pakistan has taken much longer to even begin to allow some weight to the political rights of their fellow Muslims, for example, the right to vote— something that the people of India refuse to relinquish. The spectre of military dictatorship is forever haunting Pakistan. Their democracy is far more fragile than is India's democracy. Pakistan's Mullah politicians have not yet learnt to accept even women from elite families as equals in public life. For example, Benazir's prime ministership was hotly disputed whereas in India Indira Gandhi was easily accepted as Prime Minister. No religious leader cast aspersions on Indira Gandhi solely as a consequence of her being a woman.

All this is inextricably linked to the politics of intolerance upon which the Islamic nation laid its foundation—the politics of driving people out of their homes through bloodshed in order to force a partition. Since the Pakistani nation was based on a lie, it made the Pakistan ruling elite far more neurotic and insecure in their politics. On the other hand, despite serious problems and conflicts, India has retained a democratic polity—and except in some of the border states, and despite the fiery controversies, as over the Mandal Commission Report, ethnic strife does not threaten to tear Indian society asunder. This might well happen in Pakistan. It is even possible that if India opened its border with Pakistan and allowed a free flow of people, Pakistan would soon cease to exist.

Thus both Hindus and Muslims in India gained enormously, both politically and morally, by taking the stand, represented by Gandhi and others, of insisting that Muslims would not be pushed out of India despite the disastrous partition. Those who talk of driving the Muslims out, or of letting them live here only as second class citizens, in the same way that Hindus live in Pakistan, are asking us to surrender all our advantages and strengths and commit political and moral suicide. Those who wish to hold up Pakistan as a role model display their low self esteem and lack of confidence in their own faith.

The Politics of Self Hatred

The second related argument of the BJP led Combine against Muslims is that Hindus have been wronged historically by Muslim invaders. Therefore, Hindus have the right to settle those historical wrongs. Indian Muslims are blamed not just for the partition but also for the crimes, including destruction of temples, committed by waves of invaders who happened to have been Muslims by religion. In most cases foreign

संत—असंत भेद विलगाई / प्रनतपाल मोहि कहहु बुझाई
सतन्ह के लच्छन सुनु भ्राता / अगानित श्रुति पुरान बिख्याता /
सत असतन्ह कैअसि करनी / जिमि कुठार चदन आचरनी /
काटइ परसु मलय सुनु भाई / निज गुन देइ सुगद बसाई /
ताते सुर सीसन्ह चढत जग बल्लभ श्रीखंड /
अनल दाहि पीटत धनहि परसु बदन यह दड /

“The conduct of the good to the wicked is like that of the sandal tree to the axe, for — see brother — the fragrant wood imparts its perfume to the very iron that fells it. For this reason sandal-wood is the desire of the world and has the honour of being put on the head of gods; while the axe for its punishment has its edge heated in the fire and is well-hammered.”

Tulsidas Ramayan, Uttara Kand (36-37)

invasions resulted in a lot of destruction, loot and plunder, as inevitably happens in all wars of conquests, including many of those fought among Hindu local rulers within India. Even so the RSS-BJP version of Islamic invasion is biased, for it presents an oversimplified picture of this period of our history and relies a great deal on hysterical exaggerations. However, even if one were to accept totally their view of our history, it would be self destructive to come to the political conclusions they derive from it.

The present day Muslims are no more foreign to this soil than those of us who claim to be Hindus. They cannot be used as scapegoats for the atrocities committed by the likes of Ghazni or Aurangzeb. The same logic that demands the reclaiming of all those places where mosques were built on destroyed temples can be extended further. Should we demolish many of the present day Hindu temples which were built on the remains of destroyed Buddhist religious centres? This is a never ending deadly game which, if taken seriously, will leave India as devastated as was Germany during the second world war. Most important of all, do the BJP-RSS leaders want to be remembered as the twentieth century

Aurangzebs among Hindus by their insistence on demolishing their entire hit list of mosques?

The Hinduism being propagated by the RSS-BJP Combine resembles the many brutal periods in the history of Christianity and Islam when they wreaked destruction and massacred many peoples in proselytising and conquering all over the world.

Distorting Hinduism

Hinduism unites the animate with the inanimate. There are strong voices within the Hindu tradition which forbid violence even to animals and plants, leave alone human beings. God is seen as all pervasive rather than a formidable creature dwelling in some distant heaven. *Kan Kan mein Ram basey hain* is a living faith with most Hindus. The word *dharm* in Hindu civilisation has always been used more in an expansive sense, denoting “the law of one’s being” rather than in the narrow sense of a particular religion.

This is illustrated by a story that my mother repeated often to us while I was growing up. Whenever as a child I wanted to retaliate nastily against someone who I thought had wronged me, she would patiently dissuade me from doing so using the following story to illustrate the harmfulness of making a virtue of feelings of revenge. ‘Once a



Mahatma was bathing in a river. Suddenly he saw a drowning scorpion and tried to bring it to safety.

As soon as he lifted the scorpion in his hand, the latter stung him. The pain of the sting jerked the Mahatma's hand and the scorpion fell back into the water and began drowning again. The Mahatma picked up the scorpion again and the act was repeated several times. Some onlookers were very puzzled by what appeared to them as the Mahatma's foolishness. They asked him: "Why do you persist in saving the scorpion when you know he will sting you?" The Mahatma replied: "The scorpion's *dharma* is to sting, my *dharma* as a human is compassion. I have to be true to my *dharma*, not adopt the *dharma* of the scorpion. How can I forego my *dharma* and return injury for injury when even the scorpion is not willing to leave his own?"

The BJP-RSS-VHP Combine seem determined to destroy the *dharma* of Hindus.

Unlike the god of Semitic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the gods of the Hindus are not jealous gods. We Hindus have an easy relationship with our gods. We laugh and joke about them as one would with one's friends. We play games with them and even take the liberty of getting annoyed with them. They rarely order their worshippers to attack other people's gods and religions. A whole pantheon of them coexist with each other and with various goddesses as well. None of them claim absolute supremacy or demand absolute loyalty. Our gods are not known for wreaking vengeance on their devotees if they go and pray to other gods, or in mosques, *gurudwaras* or churches. They are even forever able to accommodate new gods in deference to the wishes of their worshippers—be they recent creations within the

Hindu fold like a Santoshi Maa, or the gods of other religions who are prepared for mutual accommodation. Most Hindu gods would not get upset if a Hindu family adds a picture of Jesus Christ along with that of Shiv and Parvati. They wouldn't be annoyed if anyone sits and reads verses from the Koran or Bible in front of them. Mostly they do not claim exclusive obedience. Even today in many rural areas a *baba*, a *fakir* or a *sadhu* will be received with reverence by both Hindus and Muslims. Shrines of *bhakts* and tombs of *sufis* and *darvishes* are visited by both Hindus and Muslims. In some ways one can even be an atheist without being any the less a Hindu. A Hindu is free to create his or her own gods or goddesses. Almost every village in India worships its own local deity without interference, as well as treasuring the stories of Ram and other gods, without requiring permission from any centralised heavenly authority. The god/goddess one creates can be named according to the devotees' wishes. The *bhakt* also has the freedom to make the god look and act in diverse ways. Devotees are free to credit their chosen gods with the attributes they consider important. For example, Meera's Krishna seems to be her own special being, different from the Krishna of the Geeta or Mahabharat.

All this and more has provided a good deal of space for dissent and diversity within the Hindu religious and cultural tradition which counteracts some of its oppressive aspects. Hinduism also has the unique tradition of worshippers allowed to judge the actions of their gods as they would those of ordinary human beings. Krishna's goading of Yudhishthir to tell a lie during the battle of Kurukshetra is not condoned by all Hindus. Likewise Ram's *Shambhuk vaddh* and his unfair treatment of Sita in subjecting her to *agnipariksha* hang

heavily on the collective consciousness of the Hindus. The discomfort of the Hindus with the *agnipariksha* came out very clearly when, during Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan serial, a spate of protest letters against making Sita go through the *agnipariksha* compelled Sagar to deviate from his text and make it a different, symbolic act. Many folk songs depict Sita as defiantly protesting Ram's injustice.

Since Hindus do not even hesitate to pass judgement on the wrongdoings of their gods, it is unlikely that Mr Advani and company will manage to get away with their manipulations for too long. Much stronger voices will arise against this Combine's machination from among the Hindu fold than from among Muslims.

Pampered or Betrayed?

The Combine seeks to portray Muslims as a group which considers itself above the law of the land. Among the proofs of special privileges supposedly enjoyed by the Muslim community are cited things such as the enactment of the retrogressive Muslim Women's Protection Act in violation of the Constitution, the appointment of a couple of governors and vice-chancellors from among Muslims, installing a couple of token ministers in the cabinet, getting the government to indulge in mindlessly extravagant pro-Arab and anti-Israel foreign policy rhetoric and getting this or that book banned through protest.

Undoubtedly, the politics of the current dominant leadership among the Muslims often does live up to the pernicious stereotype that the B JP-RSS Combine assert is characteristic of Muslims. They often give the impression of being religious fanatics incapable of adhering to secular norms even though they demand that Hindus practise secular politics. The virulence with which too many Muslim leaders oppose the human rights of Muslim

women, crush dissenting voices within their own community and promote religious intolerance has contributed to destroying some of the moral and social strength of their own community. Their politics has strengthened the voices of intolerance among the Hindus.

However, government policy has played a major role in keeping Muslim leadership addicted to the politics of crumb gathering. It has also given Hindus an excuse to believe that the government is pampering the Muslim minority. The dominant political parties, especially the Congress, have not moved away from knee jerk responses calculated to consolidate the Muslim vote bank and aggravate the communal divide rather than working out a coherent, just policy of majority-minority relations. Far from enjoying special privileges, the vast majority of Muslims are denied even

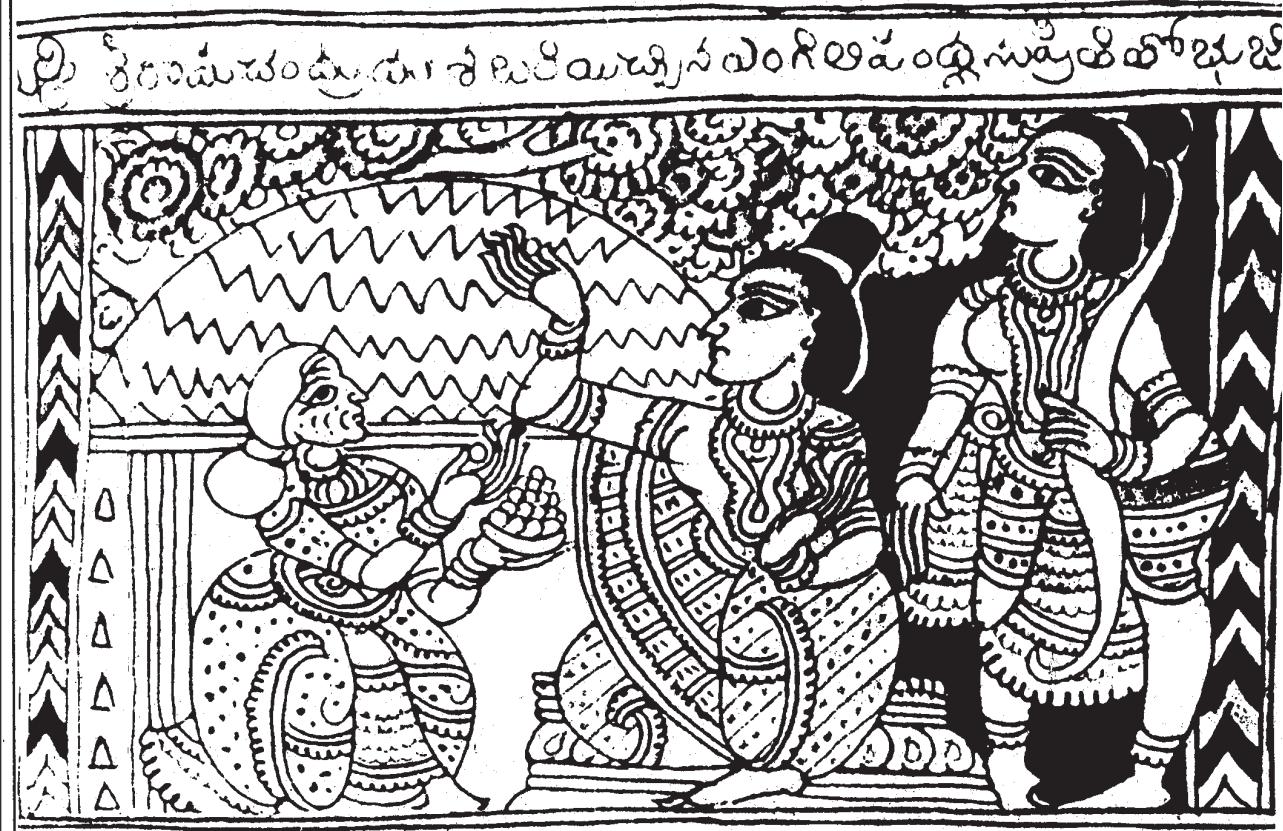
the fundamental rights promised by the Constitution. Most of them are poor and despised and are compelled to live in ghettos. They are not given equality of opportunity in employment, housing or education and show all signs of being a marginalised minority.

Seeking Hitlerian Popularity

Mr Advani and the BJP are feeling extremely heady with the large crowds they have been able to gather for their meetings on the Ram Mandir issue. Mr Girilal Jain approvingly calls this the largest mobilisation of the Hindus after Gandhi. It is the most absurd comparison ever made. Gandhi's Hinduism was rooted in the *bhakti* tradition which stood for the oneness of all human beings. Worship of god was to be expressed through a love and respect for human beings irrespective of their caste, creed, religion, gender. Violence was not permissible even against the aggression

of an enemy.

Gandhi tried to liberate from fear of all kinds the minds of all those Indians who joined him. This included fear of physical torture and deprivation. He tried to fill the hearts of his followers with real self respect, which included respect for others, no matter how different. The BJP-RSS, through manipulation and lies, are making even Hindus feel insecure and unsafe in their own land. Such is the power of relentless propaganda that the endangered Muslim minority is made out to be a grave threat for Hindus. The Muslims who are experiencing more and more difficulties providing their own minimal security are accused of jeopardising the security of India. Hitler, too, succeeded in getting large crowds to cheer him even more enthusiastically than those who have attended the BJP-RSS rallies cheer Advani. But, often, mobilisation of



Sabari gives berries to Rama who eats them heartily to her great delight.



mass hysteria around hatred and fear has no less disastrous consequences for those who are thus mobilised than for those who are oppressed.

The most serious negative consequence of this current campaign to consolidate Hindus against minorities, teaching Hindus to feel persecuted, filling their minds with lies and misinformation, is that many Hindus have come to believe that getting rid of Muslims is their national duty, that when they indulge in pogroms against Muslims they are doing it to defend their religion and their *rashtra*. Murder and mayhem is thus being made respectable, leading to a large scale criminalisation of many sections of the Hindu community. This, in my view, is the biggest danger. We must desist before the Hindu community is criminalised, as Hitler once criminalised the entire German people. This aspect of BJP-RSS ideology and work becomes evident in any city which has witnessed large scale communal violence.

Among the few cases I have personally been exposed to, I would like to describe our experience in Meerut and Maliana after the great massacre of May 1987. An all-women team of **Manushi** volunteers spent about a week collecting information soon after the killings. The officially released figures, as usual, seemed to have very little relationship to the reality of the violence and destruction. Even a casual visit confirmed that in Meerut and Maliana many more Muslim than Hindu neighbourhoods had been targets of attack and looting. The pattern of violence was similar to the one reported in other such incidents in Ahmedabad, in Bhagalpur and Gonda.

In Meerut, wherever Muslims lived together in large numbers, as in Hashimpura, Gaddha or Maliana,

Hindus were usually accompanied by the PAC in their looting, killing and murdering spree. No real resistance or retaliation was possible in such a situation. Therefore, loss of life and property was extremely one sided. It is well documented and well known that the PAC dumped dozens of bodies of Muslims from the Hashimpura area into the canal, and forced a mass burial of scores of Muslims they had massacred in Maliana village.

Lies to Instil Fear

On the whole, among the shops, houses and commercial establishments attacked or burnt down, about 90 to 95 percent belonged to Muslims. However, the death and injury toll was even more imbalanced. Despite intensive efforts, we could not identify more than five Hindus who had been killed by Muslims in Meerut. We met hardly any injured Hindus, despite conscious efforts to get to them. In contrast hundreds of Muslims had been killed and hundreds injured.

Yet such is the power of communal propaganda that most Hindus we met were convinced that Hindus were the main sufferers; they went so far as to believe that Muslims had not only instigated the violence but also burnt down their own homes in order to claim compensation from the government, and that the paltry relief measures announced (such as Rs 10,000 for each person killed) were a form of pampering the Muslim minority. We were astonished to find that the Hindus were in some ways more nervous and frightened than the Muslims. Though four out of five in the investigating team were Hindus, we had greater

difficulty in getting Hindus to talk to us. Invariably their first question was: "Are you a Muslim or a Hindu?" putting on the defensive anyone who was not identified as Hindu. Among the few Hindus who talked to us, a large number warned us against visiting Muslim neighbourhoods. The Hindus fed us with gory stories about how some women journalists who ventured into Muslim areas were brutally raped and murdered, how even PAC men were dragged into *mohallas* and butchered, whereas the authorities confirmed that nothing even remotely resembling these things had happened. Their fear of those they had helped butcher bordered on the bizarre. They felt unsafe in their own city where they had lived for generations. The loss of confidence of the Hindu community was alarming considering they were a majority actually able to get away with murder, since the police and the administration were on their side. They were afraid to talk to any strangers, including harmless looking women like us. This was contrary to the normal warmth, hospitality and openness one encounters in visiting most neighbourhoods in India — urban or rural. In contrast, the Muslims, despite having suffered greater loss of life and property, received us without reservations, grateful that someone cared to at least listen to their anguished stories.

It took a while for us to understand why those who had looted, plundered and murdered had reason to fear. The Provincial Armed Constabulary had joined them and instigated them to violence. But they lived in fear lest they

पर हित सरिस धर्म नहिं भाइ | पर पीड़ा सम नहिं अधमाई ||
निन्य सकल पुरान गेद कर | कहें तात जानहिं कोबिद नर || 1 ||

Brother, there is no religious duty like doing good to others, no meanness like causing pain to others. This, dear brother is the doctrine of Veda and Purana that I have disclosed to you, and the learned know it well.

Tulsidas Ramayan, Uttara-Kanda (40)

be implicated and tried for the crimes they had committed. Even though so many Muslims had suffered violence, the PAC stood guard only over the Harijans and the other Hindu households, many of whom had been the attackers, shielding them from journalists and outsiders, lest they inadvertently let out some damaging facts. Many of these people were only too aware that they had the blood of their neighbours on their hands, and could not hide the fear typical of criminals—the fear of being caught. They had been tutored by the PAC to allege that they had been attacked. They indulged in pathetic attempts to show evidence of violence on their homes. This usually amounted to showing us no more than a small mound of hay carefully burnt in a corner of their compound resulting in a small token loss, leaving the rest of the house untouched. Among the tutored answers, a common one was: “We don’t know what happened, we were busy in our household work and did not want to look out” or “The Muslims burnt their own homes down to claim compensation, pampered cheats as they are”. The most bizarre was the answer we got from two women in Maliana, in the house directly opposite to that of an eleven-membered Muslim family, all of whom had been killed. The highly decomposed bodies of the Muslims were discovered from the well in their compound. “How did it happen?” we asked. “We don’t know, we were busy in our house,” the women told us. “Did someone come to attack them?” “No, we did not see anyone. They burnt down their house themselves to get compensation.” “But then how did they get killed?” “The bombs they bought to attack us must have exploded in their own house by mistake.” “But how could their bodies end up in the well on their own without someone throwing them in there?”

“You don’t know how *fasadi* these Muslims are, they can manage almost anything,” was the unashamed answer, after which the women of the family closed the door and refused any further conversation. Later we learnt that this same lone Muslim family in a street full of Hindu houses had been attacked and killed by their own neighbours.

In a number of Hindu middle class areas, the fear was based on ignorance fuelled by rumours. After the imposition of curfew, most people here had stayed confined to their neighbourhoods and not witnessed any of the violence. They were fed on hysterical rumours which they were in

no position to confirm from Muslims as they had scarcely any Muslim acquaintances and had a stereotype of all Muslims as violently inclined riffraff.

Criminalising The Hindus

There were dozens of similar incidents and the same conspiracy of silence and evasiveness that characterises people when they have terrible crimes to hide. I was reminded of what a German friend had told me about a similar veil of silence in post World War II Germany. What happened during Hitler’s regime became tabooed topics. Parents would not answer even their own children’s



Many Indian homes are decorated with colourful renderings of Rama and Sita. This is a black and white reproduction of one that is popular



queries about their involvement in Nazi crimes except with an evasive "We did not know what was happening, we just did our job."

Reports of communal massacres from Bhagalpur, Ahmedabad, Gonda and elsewhere all testify to a pattern of fearful silence or aggressive evasiveness typical of criminals. While there is some mention being made of the terrible consequences on the lives of Muslims as a result of being constantly made to live in fear of violence, and the resulting ghettoisation and anxiety among them, we have altogether ignored the disastrous effects of the BJP-RSS-VHP incitements of the Hindu community. It is being systematically criminalised. Not just the poor but young men from so-called respectable middle and upper class homes are encouraged to become leaders of looting and murdering brigades. When the whole community learns to cover up these crimes, to try and rub off the stink of blood from their conscience, it is a sure sign of the advancing ruin of the community. Those of us who value the well-being of our community must not only feel ashamed of the bloodshed being committed in the name of Hinduism but also must take determined steps to halt it.

In Our Own Interest

It will not help us to evade this responsibility by pointing to the irresponsible politics of most of the Muslim leaders. If the Hindu community continues to use the follies of the Muslim leadership to legitimise discrimination and violence against Muslims, we will be doing so at our own peril. The continuing pogroms against the Muslims marginalises an already impoverished and politically vulnerable community even further. If they are denied legitimate means of earning their livelihood, even more of them are bound to be forced into a life

of petty crimes and violence. Thus the marginalisation, insecurity and ghettoisation of the Muslim community has harmful consequences for all of us and for the health of Indian society. It is foolish to insist on treating Muslims unjustly here on the specious plea that Hindus are treated badly in some of the Islamic countries. Even enlightened self interest demands that we work out a just policy for dealing with the minorities.

Where Do We Begin?

1 First and foremost, we need to restore the sanctity of our religious places and get the politicians out of them. The distortions brought about in the system of temple management during British colonial rule need to be rectified. Traditionally, religious places in India were not subservient to a distant political authority. Most temples were supported by the local community, which also exercised control over its affairs. The BJP-RSS-VHP attempt to take over the controversial Ram Mandir at Ayodhya from the hands of the local priests is not the only example of politicians usurping religious sites. Even the communists in Kerala are known to have fought fierce battles to try to wrest control over certain temples in the state. We need to work out clear rules about the governance of religious places and property, keeping politicians away from taking over religious places and ensuring they remain in the hands of the worshippers.

2 We also need to work out institutional safeguards so that the enormous wealth generated by the temples is used for social and spiritual well-being rather than power games. Provision of free food and shelter for all who come for it, as *gurudwaras* do even today, could take care of many who suffer from hunger and destitution, often in a way better than some government run programmes. The tradition of *kar seva* should be extended to improve the community's

physical environment, for example, in the provision of sanitation, clean water supply, pucca roads. The government has failed miserably in all of these areas. Provision of these basic necessities would be better taken care of if the local community, with the temples and *gurudwaras* as one source of support, took over all these public tasks.

3 An equally important task for those who wish to restore lustre to their faith would involve restoring the tradition of temples as places of learning, of religious studies, of theology, as centres of arts and culture.

4 It is vital that we counter with carefully collected facts the hate campaigns of RSS-VHP-BJP that are based on deliberate misreporting and lies. We should insist that the press and the government agencies give an accurate description of the losses suffered by Hindus and Muslims during the communal violence. An accurate knowledge of facts may help to counter the mistaken sense of persecution being inculcated among Hindus and to restrain the irresponsible rhetoric of some Muslim leaders.

5 We need to work out concrete ways of making large scale social interaction possible between the two communities. Such efforts should not be confined to *Iftar* parties hosted by ministers. The increasing ghettoisation of the Muslim community is leading to an even greater communication gap than existed previously.

6 We need to work out ways of resolving communal conflicts without resorting to needless government interventions. For example, an important reason for the success of the BJP-RSS-VHP campaign is that, as always, the secularists continue to oppose them by relying mainly on the power of the State. Few attempts were made to oppose them other than by appealing to the government to use force to prevent them from performing

the *kar seva*. The ham handed way in which the police and the paramilitary forces were used to prevent the demolition of the mosque led to unnecessary bloodshed and killings, providing a halo of martyrdom to this murderous Combine. If we do not give up our slavish dependence on the State machinery to solve such problems, we will never move towards more lasting solutions to social conflicts.

7 We need to recognise that the vast diversity of India is a source of strength and vigour and has been crucial for the survival of democracy in India. Instead of treating this diversity as a liability to be gotten rid of, as the Hindu *rashtravadis* do, we need to work to protect minorities from attack and discrimination. A consensus on this won't be difficult to attain. Every community is a minority in some part of the country, e.g., Hindus in Kashmir, Muslims in Jammu and, therefore, can be convinced to accept a uniform policy for the protection of minority rights in India.

8 The Hindu community can be mobilised to save its culture and religion from being distorted beyond recognition only if they are aware of it. In the name of promoting secular education, the Western educated elite has deliberately promoted ignorance about India's rich heritage. The task of promoting respect and creating adequate facilities for the learning of our varied religions and cultural traditions cannot and should not be left to the government. It's best undertaken by social and cultural organisations functioning outside the government patronage system.

9 A very vigorous effort is also required to preserve our ancient monuments, including temples, as these are repositories of our cultural heritage. Most of them are being destroyed beyond repair due to systematic neglect. The looting and plundering of ancient temples by



A Madhubani painting depicting Saraswati — The Goddess of learning

unscrupulous smugglers is perhaps more serious than the degradations of Mughal invaders. Yet the Hindu *rashtravadis* have maintained a studious silence on this. They could have performed a greater service if they started a campaign to protect these endangered temples. The ASI and other government departments are incapable of dealing with this task. The job of restoration has to be organised on a larger scale by ensuring the people's concerned participation.

10 No less, perhaps even more important, is the task of saving and restoring whatever is left of those

historical, religious and other texts that shed greater light on our past. It is a matter of shame that, even for recent history, one finds records much better preserved in the British Museum and other foreign libraries than in Indian libraries. White ants are merrily feeding on our precious texts and manuscripts. This process of destruction needs to be immediately halted. Much is already lost. We cannot afford to lose any more. For a people without a sense of its past is a people without a sense of self, and can more easily be manipulated into self-destruction. □