

INDIA'S DAY OF INFAMY: THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BABRI MOSQUE ON DECEMBER 6, 1992

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Far too many days of infamy stain India's troubled history. On April 13, 1919, British General Reginald Dyer was determined to teach the Punjabis a "moral lesson."

During a Sikh festival in the holy city of Amritsar, British forces under Dyer's command opened fire on an unarmed crowd in an enclosure with a few narrow exits. At least 1,000 Indians died and over 2,000 were wounded.

In 1947, over Gandhi's and many others' objections, Muslim politicians went ahead and established, with the blessing of British authorities, a new state called Pakistan, with one portion in the West and another for Muslim Bengalis in the East.

Religious tensions flared as throngs of Hindus moved out of their ancestral homes and millions of Muslims moved to their new country. At least a million people died in the conflicts that arose because of this ill-advised decision.

December 6, 1992 began as a routine day for me at Punjab University in the beautiful city of Chandigarh. I was a guest of the Department of Gandhian Studies, where I was giving some lectures and working on my book on Gandhi.

On that day, six graduate students, four Hindus and two Sikhs, had invited me to join one of their service projects. Once each week they taught Hindi or English to poor children in a Muslim village 15 miles from Chandigarh.

As we arrived in the village, I noticed that the mosque was in ruins, and I was surprised to find instead a beautiful Hindu temple, dedicated to the Goddess Durga. The students, including the Sikhs, went immediately to the temple to worship. I was shown the temple's curry kitchen, and I was told that meals served there are sometimes the only food that these villagers receive.

As I sat with the students' faculty advisor, we talked about why Gandhi thought that India's future lies in its villages, where as opposed to the cities, all the people get along, helping each other out and participating in each others religious festivals.

As I returned to the faculty hostel that evening, I noticed that everyone was crowded around the TV. There had been tension developing around the Babri Mosque

in Ayodhya, where Hindu fundamentalists had been protesting for months. They claimed that the 16th Century mosque, considered a masterpiece of Mughal architecture, had been built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama.

After that moving experience of Gandhi's India in the Muslim village, I saw TV footage of Gandhi's worst nightmare. The crowds around the mosque had grown to 200,000, and some of them broke through police lines. Armed with pick axes and sledge hammers, Hindu fanatics tore down all three domes of the Babri Mosque. Some of the militants declared that the Taj Mahal was next.

Riots broke out in India's major cities and continued for four months, and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims became deadly. In the end over 2,000 people died, including 13 bomb explosions in Mumbai in March, 1993 that killed over 200.

A train bombing in Mumbai in July, 2006 killed another 186, and the explosives were traced to Pakistani Intelligence, the same organization that supported the Taliban in Afghanistan and militants in Kashmir. When I was in New Delhi in October, 2005 Islamic terrorists set off bombs in the Bengali market, a place I frequented often during my 1999 sabbatical.

Many Indians were caught up in the nationalist fervor and more and more started voting for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose members want to reaffirm India's Hindu identity. In March, 1998, the BJP won the parliamentary election and ruled until the Congress Party pushed them out in 2004. The BJP's most controversial act was to start testing nuclear weapons after a 24-year moratorium initiated by Indira Gandhi.

Hindu militants celebrated the nuclear tests by proposing that a new Goddess temple be built at Pokharan, 30 miles from the bomb testing site. They connect her "shakti" power with the energy of the uranium atom. The followers of Shri Shena, a fundamentalist organization in Mumbai, proudly proclaimed that, after the bomb tests, Hindus were no longer eunuchs and now could stand up to the world as real men.

There are chilling parallels between Christian, Muslim, and Hindu fundamentalists, and all of us have to be vigilant against these dangerous excesses and demand tolerance and respect for all the world's religions.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read his columns at www.NickGier.com.

