Converting Histories: Hindu And Muslim Narratives

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In the vast amount of literature dedicated to the study of radical religious movements in contemporary India, a shared assumption underlies most of the analyses: this is that in order to understand the impact oF these movements, one must fully acknowledge how religious beliefs and religious affiliations are divested of their original meaning and selectively chosen or reinvented, so that they can be used and manipulated for mobilising people according to the diverse agenda of such organisations. The same pattern of explanation is often also employed in relation to the use of historical events and more generally to the reconstruction of the past in Indian society.

But, by focusing the analysis in such a way, one can explain, at best, only part of the story. It is too often assumed, for example, that one can effectively make a clear distinction between authentic beliefs and religious traditions, on the one hand, and between the instrumental use of them in political or communal arenas on the other. Without denying the relevance of existing studies, it seems to me that such a distinction can not always be maintained.

The problem is not only to understand the instrumental use of religion: it is also to explain the way people react to such instrumentalisation in their own lives: [1] which means not only, how they react to it politically but also how it comes to interfere with their own beliefs, memory and identity.

In other words, if the new modes of instrumentalising of beliefs and religious practices have an impact today, this is not only, I believe, because they inform new arenas of public life but also because such an instrumentalisation of religion contributes to a redefinition and a reformulation of existing religious beliefs and practice in a more indirect way. And it is this process which needs to be progressively better documented. It is this perspective I intend to pursue by analysing the occurrence of a 'miracle' which happened recently in the old part of the city of Delhi.

The second point I want to raise concerns the interpretations given of the impact of communalism during the last decade. It has been rightly stressed that one of communalism's most damaging effects has been to increase the gap between diverse sections of the population on the basis of religious divide, thereby threatening the potential for people to define their identity in a pluralistic way. Here again, without denying the reality of such a trend, I would like to point out some alternative repercussions of communical discourse which should, I believe, be given more detailed attention. To illustrate my point, I will briefly relate an example, also in Old Delhi, which attests the possibility of a different use the stereotypes associated with Hindu communalism.

I do not suggest that one should generalise from such an example, a very specific one, directly linked to the particular situation of a small community of Muslim Gujars in Delhi. What I will point out in that case and will elaborate further more in another example, equally in Old Delhi, is how similar patterns of argumentation and of narratives circulate and used today, perhaps more than any time before, across religious boundaries.

This is not to say that such a fact is never acknowledged; still, it must be stressed in the contemporary context. It is too often implied that the main result of religious tensions and of new forms of Hindu and Muslim militancy is to forbid the sort of common interplay which is supposed to have characterised the religious culture of India. It is easily forgotten that the very fact of antagonism is not necessarily by itself the proof of any decisive form of social or cultural distance; it may in fact also be at times, the most blatant sign - though certainly not also the most desirable one - of a strongly shared culture.

CONTEXTUALISING NARRATIVES

Naya Bans

Naya Bans remains one of the few areas to have retained a predominantly residential character in Khari Baoli, an area situated in the most heavily congested part of Old Delhi where one finds some of the most important wholesale markets of the city. One could easily forget, that at the beginning of the century, before the construction of New Delhi, this was one of the most select neighbourhood of the city. But, in Naya Bans, in spite of the way the houses have been pack-

ed together, they retain nonetheless a certain flavour of past grandeur. It was an area mainly inhabited by Hindu Khatri businessmen but there were also some wealthy Muslim trading families, mostly originating from Punjab, it seems. However, since partition, it has become an exclusively Hindu area.

There is in Naya Bans a small Shiv mandir with a *chabutra* where one always finds people resting in front of the only gate of this *Katra*. When I first came to visit this mandir, I found out that an extraordinary event had taken place just the week before. It was about noon, on the 7th May 1994, when the *pujari* of the temple had suddenly realised, while officiating in the temple, that the *sindur* he was applying to a *murti* of Hanuman (revered in a small chapel, in front of the mandir) was being washed away before his eyes. He discovered then that some water was mysteriously dripping from the left knee of this marble statue.

After a moment of initial surprise, he rushed to call other people and to show them the miracle. It took them some time to check it and to convince themselves that the water could not have leaked from anywhere else and that it was really dripping from the knee of the *murti*. During this time, the rumour of this supernatural event had spread all over the neighbourhood, particularly in Khari Baoli, an area densely crowded with Hindu traders as well as coolies and customers. According to reports, the miracle disrupted the street as thousands of people flocked to the temple in order to witness the miracle and to get darshan of the divinity. Huge quantities of sweets (hundred of kgs if one believes what I was told) had been offered as prasad in the temple. The water dripped throughout afternoon as well as the following Saturday. Nevertheless, when I first arrived there was no trace of water on Hanuman's knee although the *pujari* and others present seemed confident that the miracle would occure again. They asked me to come back another day and took my telephone number in order that I could check it myself if it happened again. Effectively, when I returned to the temple, the following day, water was dripping slowly from the statue. A few months later, it seemed to have become just a regular feature of this temple with worshippers coming to drink the droplets of water from Hanuman's knee.

Now, there is no doubt that a link can be drawn between such happening and the recent Hindu trend of placing particular emphasis not only on the devotion of Ram but also Hanuman. Such a trend has increased dramatically with the diffusion of the Ramayana on Doordarshan in 1987 and has found a new actuality in the controversy at Ayodhya. I can not speak for the country as a whole but I know that in Delhi, the cult of Hanuman, which has always been present in the religious life of the people, has certainly increased in popularity in recent years. It seems to be even particularly the case in parts of Delhi inhabited by both Hindus and Muslims, where one can see a number of new temples, usually dedicated to Shiva but where Hanuman is also prominent. One can also notice the vast display of posters and of images which represent the Monkey God as well as pamphlets which traders distribute to their clients.

It would seem that the martial virtues of Hanuman and his role as the 'security guard' of Ram, as one person put it, are particularly stressed these days. For example, it is known that Hanuman has been traditionally associated with wrestling activities. Such an association is explicitly acknowledged in the banner of a sports club in Silampur where Hanuman was prominently represented, this in spite of the fact that the organiser of the club declared himself a staunch supporter of Congress and insisted on the purely secular and recreational vocation of his club.

So, let us now consider the different dimensions of the miracle of Hanuman's weeping knee. On the one hand, there can't be any doubt that its very occurrence participates in a broader trend, directly associated to current forms of Hindu revivalism. Such a form of revivalism focuses neatly on a few selected gods in the Hindu patheon, as well as on defined aspects of their character, thereby emphasising the dimensions of Hinduism that revivalists wish to stress.

On the other hand, one should not doubt either that such a miracle could equally have a perfectly authentic religious character. It would certainly make no sense to reduce it to a mere propaganda tool for Hindu revivalism. As far as I know, the one and only person to have expressed any form of scepticism about the authenticity of this miracle was a sardani who recognised nevertheless the deep religious feelings which permeated the life of the Hindu traders in this *mahallah*.

So, in this particular case, as in many other cases, I suspect, one should be not too eager to overstress, as it is often done, the contrast between some kind of authentic religion and what is generally defined as a lesser form

of hinduism, perverted by politics and the media. Rather, one should take into full account the difficulty and, often, the impossibility of establishing any clear-cut distinction between the various faces of religious discourse.

While I was enquiring about this temple which, according to its inscription, had been built in 1883, a member of the Temple Committee told me the following history in front of the other people present. During the riots which accompanied partition, the temple had been practically destroyed and the lingam which served as its main murti had been stolen by a butcher who used it for sharpening his knives. But one resident of the *Katra* saw Shiva in a dream. The god was covered with blood and addressed him with the following words: "I am there, in this house". Shiva then described to him the precise location of the house and how to find it; "come with others to rescue me and take me back to my mandir". The residents of the katra then organised an expedition; they succeeded in finding the *lingam*, took it back with them and fixed it solidly at its proper place back in the mandir. While this story was related to me, an old man appeared and was requested to sit near us; he was the person who had seen Shiva in the dream and he recounted the same story again.

Listening to this story, one could not help link it up to the fact that, at the very time they were telling it, there was one of the most important strikes of butchers that had ever taken place, going on in Delhi. This strike was affecting the commerce and consumption of meat throughout the city and was regularly discussed in every newspaper.

What I wish to stress here is a very similar point to the one that I made in relation to the miracle of Hanuman. It seems more than plausible that some sort of link existed between the telling of the story of this temple and the very existence of the butcher's strike. But what sort of link? I do not believe that anyone could define it clearly.

The past history of Delhi is such that one cannot dismiss the fact that such a story seems perfectly plausible to the people of the *mahallah*. Furthermore, it would be wrong to assume a recent origin for this story simply because it was recounted at the time of the butcher's strike.

Perhaps the only way to comprehend the liaison between these elements is to emphasise the manner in which contemporary events, individual memories and local stories can fit together in such a manner that they seem to echo and reinforce each other, offering a basis for some sort of comparison between the past and the present.

Shahtara

At more or less the same period of time, not far from the Khari Baoli area, I happened to meet some Gujars from whom I intended to learn about the art of buffalo keeping and the commerce of milk in inner cities[2]; They belonged to a small community of Muslim Gujars who, according to them, had been settled in this part of old Delhi, called Shahthara, from the very beginning of the existence of the city. I was soon introduced to one of the leaders of this community. He had been a renowned wrestler and owner of an akhara where he still supervised the training of wrestlers. Between other sorts of activities, he was also President of a Committee in charge of the management of the second-hand market organised, every Sunday behind the Red Fort in Old-Delhi. Finally, he was also the President of the All India Muslim Gujars Association.

Something he stressed in front of me was how Gujars like himself were in fact Hindus who had converted to Islam. He could still trace his previous Hindu ancestry and he did not hesitate to assert his knowledge of Hindu epics and Hindu traditions generally. He also explained how he had personally taken care of Hindu shopkeepers, in the Sita Ram Bazaar whenever there was communal tension in the city. He pointed out that the real divide was not between Hindus and Muslims but rather between Hindu or Muslim Indians like himself and that category of Muslims which he defined as 'foreigners' (Pathans, Sheikhs).

Now there is no doubt here that the discourse of this community leader was very similar to the propaganda of the Hindu nationalists. But this is precisely why it is interesting to pay attention to such discourse, whilst at the same time, recognising that it is a very specific case.

It has been stressed that one of the most damaging results of the recent wave of Hindu nationalism has been to deepen the fracture between Hindu and Muslim communities and to oblige everyone to identify themselves within the frame of a single identity. Nevertheless, in the case cited above, the situation appears more complicated.

On the one hand, Gujars, like many other communities in India, fit in the category of populations which have evolved a certain degree of syncretism be-

tween Hindu and Muslim traditions. This particular Gujar explained for example, why there was, in reality, no real distinction, but only a difference of designation, between Baba Adam and Lord Shiva. Gujars are in fact divided between Hindus and Muslims who do not hesitate to eat, drink and smoke together even if they do not intermarry. Moreover, in the particular case cited above, the man concerned was also associated with the tradition of akharas, a tradition equally known for its importance in syncretic forms or urban culture in north India.[3]

One the other hand, Muslim Gujars have retained a relatively low status not only in the eyes of the Hindus but also in the eyes of other Muslims; particularly those ones who claim a higher status by stressing their ancient links with foreign ancestry (*ashraf*)[4].

So, in this very specific case, what one finds is more or less the opposite of what is supposed to be the most damaging effect of Hindu revivalism: far from imposing on this man a unidimensional identity, the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism seemed to coincide for once, with the different standards of his identity. It allowed him to assert both his Indianness and his religious faith; it also allowed him also to elevate a combination which has traditionally been considered as inferior. This further enabled him to question existing forms of hierarchy within the Muslim community itself[5].

Such a case is certainly too singular for anyone to think to contest the offensive power of Hindu propaganda and its divisive effects on the relations between Muslims and Hindus. It is nevertheless exemplary for different reason: it shows how very similar forms of argumentation can assume very different implications according to who uses them. So, in this particular example, a theme, more commonly employed in order to discriminate against minorities of the population on the basis of their religious affiliation, could be turned into an asset in the hands of the subordinate fraction of one of these minorities. Furthermore, the very fact of recycling similar sorts of arguments, beyond any well established religious boundaries, has much more general implications, as will be shown in the next example.

SEQUENCES OF TRANSFORMATION

The two previous examples focused on isolated sequences where one could point out varied processes of transformation at stake in the ideology of people, from one level of explanation to another one. So, in the case of the Shiv temple at Khari Baoli, one could see how a general trend in the evolution of Hinduism, largely informed by political motivations, nevertheless found a form of translation, at the most local level, which enabled it to be lived out by people as genuine religious experience.

In the same way I pointed out the way in which contemporary events like a strike of butchers in the city coalesced in such a way with collective evocations of a local past that after a while, it seemed practically impossible to distinguish any more what belonged to the past and what belonged to the present. And in the case of the discourse of the Muslim Gujars, what I have shown is the way in which the same discourse can take on very different meanings according to the context in which it is employed.

Such processes of transformation can not be considered in isolation or even by referring them only to any strictly delimited local context or period of time. So, for example, what is really at stake in the case of the miracle at Khari Baoli is the sort of links which were then established between not only the past of Delhi but also the contemporary evolution of Hinduism and the butchers' strike. Events observable at the local level are, very often, only discreet elements in much larger sequences of transformation which cross over, not only the usual sociological distinctions between confessional boundaries or between religion and politics but also between any established dichotomies concerning geographical locations, past vs present or fact vs discourses. Nevertheless, such connections do not always merge effectively together, whatever the efforts of those who try to establish the links. I will try to demonstrate this point in my last example.

From Hanumangarhi (1855) to Akbaribad (1857)

While I was in Old Delhi, a polemic arose between the Chief Minister of Delhi, Madan Lal Khurana and the Naib Imam of the Jama Masjid, Syed Ahmed Bukhari. The question was to know if the former would give the administrative authorisation to the latter to build a commercial complex in the immediate vicinity of the Masjid. My intention is not to go into the details of this polemic, about which I do not know much; but rather to recount the sequence of narratives which came to be linked together.

According to the Imam, an informal authorisation had been given to him to build this commercial complex while he was

negotiating with representatives of the central government in the second half of 1992. So, in 1994, he expressed his indignation that the authorisation was now being refused by M.L. Khurana who in the mean time, had become Chief Minister of Delhi.

The dates during which the original negotiations took place were not insignificant. It was in the months which immediately preceded the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya and the Imam was then the Vice-President of a committee directly involved in the controversy (All India Babari Masjid Action Committee). So when this new polemic emerged, in 1994, political opponents of the Imam, both Hindu and Muslim ones, insinuated that he may have earlier negotiated some sort of deal with the party in power and with the government[6].

When the Chief Minister of Delhi made it clear publicly that he would never allow the Imam to build the commercial complex, the Imam retaliated in a sermon, given a few days later, at the Friday prayers at the Jama Masjid. According to newspapers, he not only announced that the planned commercial complex would go ahead, whether authorised or not, but he also announced that a new mosque was shortly to be constructed in another location, near the Jama Masjid. He explained that an ancient mosque had previously existed in this location. It had been constructed in 1650 at the orders of Akbaribad, a maidservant in the court of Shahajan. But it had been destroyed by the British in 1857 and it was time now for it to be rebuilt. Since this declaration of the Imam, it seems that nothing much has happened but, at the time there were many people, including the Muslim Gujars, who worried that such a controversy could easily worsen and degenerate into violence.

What I want to stress here is not the 'rights' or 'wrongs' of the individuals involved. Neither do I want to speculate about what was going on. Rather I intend only to reflect about the sequence of narratives which have been linked together by the main actors in this controversy. But before doing so, I would like to recall very briefly another sequence of events.

According to historians[7], the seeds of the controversy in Ayodhya can be traced back to events which seem to have been initially related, not to the mosque itself, but to a nearby temple of Hanuman (Hanumangarhi)[8]. At this point of time, it was Muslims who seem to have begun the hostilities under the leadership of a Sunni leader, Gulam Husain, who advocated attacking the temple on the grounds that the Bairagis installed here had destroyed an ancient mosque while enlarging the compound of the Hanuman complex. Also, according to historians, it was after this first incident that Hindus began to accuse more precisely the Muslims of having destroyed an Hindu temple by building the Babra Masjid. From this time on, the controversy has perpetuated itself at different degrees of intensity until the present day.

What seems most noticeable in both Delhi and Ayodhya cases, and still more in the way in which some protagonists have tried to link the cases together, is the use by both Hindus and Muslims of very similar patterns of interpretation: notably a rhetorical displacement operated by attempting to shift the focus of attention from the history of one particular edifice to the history of another. So in the Old Delhi case, one could observe how different actors attempted to link in one way or another, the future of this commercial complex and the destiny of two very different sorts of edifices: a Hindu temple at Ayodhya and a mosque near the Jama Masjid.

One could assume, of course that it was only rhetoric that was at stake in this particular case. And one could also argue as well that the real question was really a civil matter to do with the conflict between financial interests and the logic of urban planning in a city like Delhi. Incidentally, it was precisely this position that was openly taken by Madan Lal Khurana, the Chief Minister of Delhi.

But, if one considers the political and the ideological undertones which characterised the entire affair, the question was rather to know whether it could remain a purely administrative matter or whether it would shortly evolve into a political or communal issue? Would it be linked in a still more explicit manner to the recent events in Ayodhya, perhaps even to the whole history of the urban space in Old Delhi from 1857? If interpreted only as a municipal matter it might spark off an isolated polemic. But in the latter cases, it could deteriorate rapidly and become a very sensitive problem.

In contrast with the preceding ones, this last controversy has not much to do with any existent form of social or religious tradition. It can nevertheless be referred to as an example of what could be defined as the shared culture of communalism. As such, it can't be reduced either to a loose form of ideology. On the contrary, the culture of communalism disposes a very precise

cultural repertoire and of a well known history even if it remains a particularly controversial one. So, the organisation of certain religious processions[9] or the current trend in Delhi of building new mosques and new temples as near as possible to each other belong definitively to such a tradition; and specific controversies such as those related to the issue of animal- slaughter or to the past history of temples and mosques are very often part of it.

Conclusion

Fortunately, no serious communal incident seems to have occurred last year when I was working in Old Delhi. But, of course, this did not mean that all communal feelings or all communal ideologies were absent. Rather one could observe two different sorts of processes at work: on the one hand, one realised that communal feelings could exist or be exacerbated wherever they found an echo, even a very tenuous one, in the memory of the people, in the fabric of their identity or in the past of the city. But on the other hand one could equally observe as well that, because of this, communal rhetoric could acquire very different implications in different contexts.

So, each time I was made aware of potential forms of communalism in the area of the city where I worked, they were either so contextualised that they acquired altogether a different signification (as in the case of the Hanuman's miracle or of the Muslim Gujars) or they were too decontextualised and politicised to have, at this very point of time, a real impact with the people (as in the case of the Babri Masjid commercial complex). This is, I suspect, what happens when nothing much happens.■

*** A French Sociologist working in India. The article was written before the 'Milk Miracle'.**

References

1 One of the most interesting attempts in this direction has been done by N. Bhattacharya in 'Myths, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhumi' S. Gopal, ed. (1991) *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, Delhi, Penguin.

2 For an ancient ethnographic survey of Gujars in North India, cf. A.H. Bingley (1899) *Jats and Gujars*, Delhi, Ess Ess Pub. Delhi, 1978.

3 cf S. B. Freitag, ed. (1989) *Culture and Power in Benaras*, Delhi, O.U.P.

4 cf Imtiaz Ahmad, ed. (1978) *Caste and Stratifications Among Muslims in India*, Delhi, Manohar.

5 According to Jamous (1991), Meos use very similar sorts of arguments in order to deny the hierarchical superiority of *ashraf* Muslims in Mewat, cf. R. Jamous (1991) La relation freres-soeurs, Paris, EHESS.

6 cf, as an example, the declarations of a BJP leader Sikander Bakt (4 July 1994) and of S. Shahabuddin ('Shahabuddin's statements on maintenance of Jama Masjid') reported in *Muslim India* n. 140, August 1994

7 K.N. Panikkar (1991) "A historical review" S. Gopal (ed) *Anatomy of a confrontation*, Delhi, Penguin.

8 for details on the religious activities at Hanumangiri at this point of time, cf. P. Van der Veer (1989) *Gods on earth*, Oxford, O.U.P. It is worth noting that, according to this author, Hanuman was then worshipped not only by Hindus but also by Muslims (p.149-150).

9 cf c. Jaffrelot (1994) "Processions hindoues, strategies politiques et emeutes entre hindous et musulamans" in D. Vidal, G. Tarabout, E. Meyer, ed. *Violence et non-violences en Inde*, Paris EHESS.