600,000 Bricks For Lord Rama
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Fifty thousand Kumbha Mela pilgrims enthusiastically cheered as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of India unveiled a plan to descend en masse upon the traditional place of Lord Rama's birthplace in Ayodhya, India, tear down the Babri Masjid mosque which has occupied the site for 450 years and build a new temple. In the adroitly orchestrated meeting, the VHP won the endorsement of such influential spiritual leaders as the Shankaracharya of Kanchi Peetam, Swami Jayendra Saraswati, and the venerable Deoraha Baba.

VHP leaders declared, "There are 600,000 villages and 800,000,000 Hindus. If every village donates one brick (dubbed Rama Shilas, "Rama stones") and every Hindu donates just one rupee (a total of US $77 million), the battle for Ram Janam Bhoomi will be half over. This program has to be taken from village to village." If the plan materializes, on November 9th, 100,000 Hindus from all over India will carry the bricks to Ayodhya and rebuild the temple. According to a VHP founding trustee, Mrs. Vijayaraje Scindia (also national vice-president of the Bharatiya Janata Party), the marchers will come prepared to face all consequences.

Mr. Sheo Nath Katju, national President of the VHP said, "Let the government be not in doubt about the Hindus' intentions which are clear. Let the government understand now that the policy of appeasement would not work anymore. The shrine should be fully handed over to the Hindus to whom it belongs." The VHP is also demanding the return of the site of Lord Krishna's birthplace at Mathura and the Shiva temple site at Gyanvari in Benares, both presently occupied by mosques built centuries ago.

The Indian press has flayed the meeting and called the plan illegal. A New Delhi paper. The Statesman, ran headlines suggesting the march would "trigger open war." Hyderabad's Newstime warned of a "bloody finale" for the march. Other, more analytical newspaper reports point out that the VHP has made quite a coup. The endorsement of Kanchi's Jayendra Saraswati has given them a much-needed

foothold in South India. And focusing public attention on the issue of Rama's birthplace during the campaign for December's crucial parliamentary elections provides the VHP maximum political leverage.

The dispute over the ownership of the temple/mosque site is currently in the courts. In his first intervention in the matter. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi personally ordered the judicial proceedings be pursued with all due speed. Indeed, the objective of the VHP plan may be to force a favorable legal settlement.

Within days of the VHP conference, prominent Muslim leader Syed Shahabuddin proposed that if it could be proved that the mosque had been built by demolishing a temple, he had no objection to the mosque's being pulled down and would, in fact, "help in demolishing it." It is a little-known fact that the Koran forbids the construction of mosques out of the remains of other places of worship, although this was done many times across India, according to Muslim records.

The potentially violent confrontation of the marchers at Ayodhya can be avoided if the courts award the site to the Hindus, or if some compromise is made first. But compromise is an unlikely possibility given the hardball rhetoric of the Kumbha Mela meeting.

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