

['Ramshila' Processions Leave One Thousand Dead](#)

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Religious Leaders Fail to Stop Clashes as Hindu Marches Ignite Hindu/Muslim Animosity

During the last two weeks of October, 1989, more than one thousand Hindus and Muslims died in riots associated with the ceremonial procession of sacred bricks ("Ramshilas") from villages throughout India to Ayodhya. The bricks are intended for the construction of a new temple to Lord Rama on the traditional site of Rama's birthplace in Ayodhya, presently occupied by a Muslim mosque. Riots associated with marches occurred at as many as 100 places, with deaths at Sitamarhi, Jharia and Madhubani. But the worst was Bhagalpur, the most violent communal battle since India's partition.

It's more than three months since the small town of Bhagalpur in the state of Bihar was struck by disaster. It was so gruesome and cruel that even today those who were lucky to survive it shudder talking about it. Some of the journalists who recently went with Prime Minister V.P. Singh on a visit to the scene of a large-scale massacring of both Hindus and Muslims in October last year felt a mysterious silence and enveloped the ill-starred town. One of them described it to HINDUISM TODAY as the "silence of death."

The local administration is still checking out the number of the dead, permanently crippled or seriously injured in the battles the Hindu and Muslim fanatics had fought on October 24 and for several more days in one locality after another and one street after another. Even today bodies of men and women and children are being recovered from houses. At least one mosque was destroyed by the rioters.

According to the eye-witness accounts, the communal carnage that burst on Bhagalpur was not entirely unexpected. It was, in fact, in the making for months until it could no longer be contained. And both the Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists played an equally provocative role. A political leadership with an enlightened view and an administration free from any influence of religious or communal bodies could have stopped the tense relationship between the two communities from reaching a flash-point.

The Hindu/Muslim relationship had grown tense for various reasons, including the halting of traffic in Tatarpur every Friday during the prayers at the mosque, and Hindus not being allowed on any day to sing bhajans or kirtans loudly enough as it disturbed the Muslims performing namaaz prayers at the mosque. Some Muslim priests were also allegedly found inciting the Muslim youth against Hindus. The allegations may not be true, but they were readily believed and propagated by some militant leaders of Hindus in Bhagalpur. The Muslim leaders allege that for four or five years some organizations of Hindu fundamentalists, like Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and RSS, have been systematically working to turn public opinion against Muslims by describing them as "anti-nationalist." Muslims militants organized themselves and procured sophisticated weapons to defend their community. About a month earlier, a Hindu procession on the same route erupted into a riot in which one Muslim was murdered.

It appears that many had reliable information that a major clash would take place on October 24th as the militants of both communities were spoiling for a show-down. This is proved by the fact that the principal of the Sundarwati Mahila College got suspicious and immediately had the hostel for girls vacated and the Muslim college closed. A large number of government employees were absent from their offices and few lawyers were seen in the courts. Many people returned home early. Why the district administration, therefore, could not anticipate the trouble and stop the procession is not clear.

When the procession, organized by the VHP, entered Tatarpur on October 24th, several hundred Muslims blocked its passage, claiming it was not a religious procession. District Magistrate Arun Jha and Superintendent of Police K.S. Dwivedi, who were escorting the marchers, insisted that the procession be allowed to pass through the mosque area. The situation grew tense. Hundreds of people had collected on roof-tops, and they looked grim and furious. They were mostly Muslims. The officials were arguing with the Muslim youths and contacting their religious leaders for assistance when a bomb suddenly exploded amidst the procession. The police force regrouped and charged. Dwivedi killed two Muslims on

the spot. Some observers said a large number of the Hindu processionists were suddenly armed. They raced down the road to charge at the Muslims. More bombs fell from rooftops. Then all hell broke loose and mayhem was on.

The VHP leaders and officials claim that the Muslim militants were armed with bombs and even AK-47 rifles and had planned to attack the procession. The Muslim leaders, on the other hand, say even the Hindu women in the procession were armed with lethal weapons. These weapons, they allege, hidden under the saris they wore, were taken out and handed over to the men. Whatever the case, when houses were searched two days later guns were found in both communities, and the Muslims were in possession of some AK-47s.

For days the killing continued. Whenever assailants belonging to one community got an opportunity to kill and bury the unsuspecting and helpless members of the other community, they did so. The police looked on as silent spectators. There is reason to believe that on several occasions the police themselves lent a helping hand to the marauding gangs belonging to the Hindu community.

Village after village in Bhagalpur are today mute witness to the brutalization of human conscience that has come through aggravating the long standing Hindu/Muslim animosities. The villages include Tomani, Rapuni, Rajpur and Chanderi. If the Hindu militants killed about 400 residents of Rajpur and other villages, the Muslim militants massacred about 400 Hindu students of the Bhagalpur University and Sanskrit College in an attempt to settle the score. The Hindu students were executed and their bodies dumped in wells and other places.

Recent Developments On December 30th, a 21 member committee, led by the Jain leader Acharya Sushil Kumar, was formed in New Delhi to find a peaceful solution to the Ayodhya dispute. Hindu members include four Shankaracharyas. Among the eight Muslims members is the Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid. Kumar said the religious leaders needed to assume the role of a third force to settle the dispute in a just and peaceful manner.

The committee formation may be just in time, for on December 22nd the VHP released a letter to Prime Minister V.P. Singh of India demanding the Babri Masjid be moved from its present location and the site handed over to Hindus. If not, the

letter threatened, it would be taken by force. "If for any reason you do not fulfill this just demand of Hindu society, you will be compelling hundreds of thousands of Ram devotees of this country to collectively enter in Ayodhya and hand over the entire area of Sri Rama Janmabhoomi to Sri Rama Janmabhoomi Nyaas, so that the construction of the temple could be taken up. In case your Janata Dal Government will make any effort to prevent this by use of police force, the devotees of Bhagwan Sri Ram shall sacrifice their lives keeping themselves non-violent. Already in the past lakhs of Ram devotees have sacrificed their lives in fighting 76 battles with the Mughal army. If this is the will of the Almighty that there should be more sacrifices, the devotees of Rama, under the leadership of revered saints, shall gladly sacrifice their lives."

Women Spiritual Leaders Advise Peaceful Solution

Ma Yoga Shakti, India

"We cannot destroy or deny the existence of all the religions that are existing right now. But we can be friendly, we can love and respect and honor each other. Both parties can negotiate and find a solutions. If people are good, everything turns out very nice. That is devotion, bhakti yoga which turns poison into nectar, fire into coolness. Fundamentalism will not bring any success. It will destroy people and create more hate. Humanity has to be respected. Life is a gift from God."

Swami Radha, Canada

"God has created numerous and countless varieties of human beings. God has given people creative power to love Him and to express that love for Him. But when love becomes competition the questions is: If God is all powerful in every religion, does He need human protection? Human beings must control ambitious perceptions of the Divine in order to truly surrender [to God]. Militant expression of that love is very foolish."

Swami Parvati, USA

"Any friction and fighting that goes on is for man's ago, it isn't religion. People need to learn to live together in harmony, peace and love and it has to start in India. I call for an end to it. There is enough room in Ayodhya for the Muslim and the Hindu to live in peace. The solution is changing men's mentality toward the ignorance that there is 'myness' in the world. If is God's place and we are all part of that."

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