The Ayodhya conflict is a dispute over a sacred space between the two largest religious communities in India: Hindus and Muslims. It is, moreover, tightly bound to colonial thinking and colonial politics in 19th-century British India, and thus nowaday-displays the paradigmatic embodiment of a phenomenon known as ‘communalism’: an ideology that perceives society entirely as divided between religious communities, which have nothing in common.

In India, this ideology found its most pithy expression in the so-called ‘Two Nations Theory’ by Muhammad Ali Jinnah in 1930.

After the tragic events that accompanied the partition of India in 1947, and the creation of Pakistan as the state of Muslim Muslims, the Einstein of the prime minister of the Indian Union and leader of the National Congress Party, Jawaharlal Nehru, that India shall become a secular democracy, sees from the very beginning to have fallen prey to communalist tendencies within Indian society. The communalism became a major tendency in post-independence India, taking up this assumption and arguing that the Indian Union was to politically safeguard the interests of the Hindu religious majority. Thus the idea of a unified, strong and self-confident Hindu ‘nation’ came into being, and turned communalism into Hindu ‘nationalism’.

The bundling of the various Hindu nationalist forces was achieved by the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella organization, under which outfits like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Hindu Parishad (HP) or the Shiv Sena, could coordinate their activities and work out strategies to reach different layers of society. Out of one such strategy the Hindu rashtriya swataro Janata Party (BJP), emerged in 1980. The rhetoric of this new political association included, besides a national political economy, and the topics of ‘justice versus corruption’, more and more religious symbols as core strategies of political mobilization within the process of communalization of the political sphere. 1 Major symbols are sacred law and sacred space, the first became manifest in the debate on Uniform Civil Code versus Muslim Personal Law which reached its peak so far in the so-called Shah Bano case in 1985.2 The second, sparkled off by the mosque-temple dispute, found its climax with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992 by militant Hindu nationalist outfits.

Growing self-confidence among Hindus in this process became evident in the utilization of sacred space in Ayodhya when a part of the Babri Masjid was occupied by a renowned Hindu priest that year, setting a platform for worship in its courtyard, claiming the place to be the historical birthplace of Rama (Ramanjanmabhumi). This incident, 145 years ago, marked the beginning of the actual Babri Ramanjanmabhumi dispute.

Communal polarization
What followed, up to today, might be described as flux and reflux of juridical and activist conflicts. For about one hundred years, the issue was left to the court, while the sources prove that the British colonial administration was more concerned with maintaining a status quo than with taking sides with one of the conflicting parties. But when, on the morning of 23 December 1949, idols of Rama and his wife Sita were found under the middle dome of the mosque, the Indian government took occasion of the riots following, declared the mosque a disputed area and closed it down for both conflicting communities. Another three decades of juridical struggle followed, during which Hindu nationalist thought entered almost every strata of the Indian society. As its clear expression, the VHP in 1961 openly called for the demolition of the mosque. In 1984, a ‘Committee to Sacrifice for the Liberation of Rama’s Birthplace’ was founded and, finally in 1986, by decision of the district court of Fayaabad, the mosque reopened for Hindus only. From here it took only a short step to a secret agreement between VHP and the Union Home Minister in 1989 to erect a temple on the place of the mosque and to the demolition of the mosque in 1992.

The Indian Muslim intelligentsia was aware of the danger of communal polarization of Indian society at quite an early stage. Attempting to jointly face these developments, a number of non-governmental bodies were set up, comprising otherwise hostile fractions within the Muslim community. As early as 1964, a so-called Majlis-i-Mushawarat (AMMM) was founded, followed by the All-India Muslim Personality Law Board (AMPLB) in 1972. Even though the latter refers primarily to another issue within the communalist dispute, it cannot be seen as separate from a joint effort of the Muslim communities in India to unite in a single Hindu priest that year, setting a platform for worship in its courtyard, claiming the place to be the historical birthplace of Rama (Ramanjanmabhumi). This incident, 145 years ago, marked the beginning of the actual Babri Ramanjanmabhumi dispute.

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2. For an overview cf.: Ali Asghar Engineer (ed.), The Saffron Wave: Communalism and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India (New Delhi, 1997), 1–10.
5. Cf. Ibid., 139.

Notes

3. For an overview cf.: Ali Asghar Engineer (ed.), The Saffron Wave: Communalism and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India (New Delhi, 1999), 148–52.