The North-Indian town of Ayodhya is scene to a controversy over a Hindu sacred site, the Rama Janmabhoomi or “birthplace of Rama”. That is where a mosque, the Babri Masjid, was built in forcible replacement of an earlier Hindu temple, in 1528 under Moghul emperor Babar at the latest, and demolished by a Hindu crowd in 1992. The controversy pits Hindu activists against a combine of Muslim activists and the so-called “secularists”, an array of Hindu-born Marxists and US-oriented ‘globalists’ who share a hatred of Hindu assertiveness. The matter has been subjudice at the High Court of nearby Allahabad since 1950, when Hindus had taken control of the mosque by installing statues of the deified hero Rama, his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana. Now, Hindu organisations are preparing to build a proper temple at the site. Muslims organisations are reclaiming the site, and the judges have endlessly been postponing their intervention.

At least until the winter of 2002-2003, for then the court secretly asked a specialized firm to scan the underground by radar for traces of the foundation of a temple predating the mosque. One of the questions on which a verdict could arguably be based, was whether there had indeed been a temple at the site before the mosque was built.

**A Splendid Consensus**

Actually, until 1989 there had been no question about the site’s history. All the written sources, whether Hindu, Muslim or European, were in agreement about the pre-existence of a Rama temple at the site. “Rama's birthplace is marked by a mosque, erected by the Moghul emperor Babar in 1528 on the site of an earlier temple”, according to the 1989 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, entry “Ayodhya”. Neither was there any document contradicting this scenario: no account of a forest chopped down to make way for the mosque (already unlikely in the centre of an ancient town), no sales contract of real estate to the mosque’s builder, nothing of the kind. By contrast, there was testimony after testimony of Hindus bewailing and Muslims boasting of the replacement of the temple with a mosque; and of Hindus under Muslim rule coming as close as possible to the site in order to celebrate Rama’s birthday every year in April, in continuation of the practice at the time when the temple stood.

And if authors of testimonies may be unreliable, there was also the archaeological evidence: in the 1970s, a team of the Archaeological Survey of India led by Prof. B.B. Lal dug out some trenches just outside the mosque and found rows of pillar-bases which must have supported a larger building predating the mosque. Moreover, in the mosque itself, small black pillars with Hindu sculptures had been incorporated, a traditional practice in mosques built in forcible replacement of infidel temples to flaunt the victory of Islam over Paganism.
The only remaining question about the site was its status in the period 1192-1528. In 1192 and the subsequent years, practically all the Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries in North India were demolished by Mohammed Ghori and his Turkish invaders. It is impossible that the medieval temple at the site could have survived until 1528. The most likely scenario is the one well-attested at another famous temple site: the Somnath temple in Gujarat. No less than nine times did Hindus reclaim it as a temple, until Muslims retook it and turned it into a mosque again. Since Ayodhya was a provincial capital of the Delhi Sultanate, opportunities for wresting the site from Muslim control were certainly more limited than in the case of the outlying Somnath temple. Then again, the frequent infighting among the Muslim elite may have given rebellious Hindus some opportunities too. From peculiarities in the architecture of the Babri Masjid, art historians on both sides of the debate (Sushil Srivastava, R. Nath) have deduced that the main part of the structure had been built well before the Moghul invasion, probably in the 14th century. In that case, the tradition that it was built by Mir Baqi may be based on the following scenario: towards the end of the Sultanate period, Hindus may have managed to recapture the site and to turn it into a functioning temple, until Babar and his lieutenant Mir Baqi firmly imposed Muslim control again and gave some finishing touches to the mosque architecture in replacement of any Hindu elements that had come to adorn it. But this must for now be kept inside speculative brackets. What is certain is that a major Hindu temple at the site was demolished by Islamic iconoclasm and replaced with a mosque symbolizing the victory of Islam over Infidelism. Of that, evidence is plentiful and of many types.

The JNU fatwa

Yet, in 1989, all this evidence was brushed aside by a group of 25 academics from Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi), mostly declared Marxists, who issued a statement denying the existence of any evidence for the temple: The Political Abuse of History. Not that they offered any newfound data to support this dramatic reversal of the consensus, all they had to show was some totally contrived reinterpretations of a few of the existing data plus the worn-out slogans against “Hindu communalism”. But the sympathy of the Indian and international media for their purported motive of “upholding secularism” assured the immediate worldwide adoption of the new party-line as Gospel truth: the demolished Rama temple had merely been a malicious invention of the ugly Hindu nationalists.

Note that they didn’t just settle for a political rejection of any plans to replace the mosque with a temple. They could sensibly have argued that the demolition of the temple happened long ago and could not now be a reason for reversing the event. That exactly had been the verdict given by a British judge in 1886 when ordering a status quo at the site. No, instead they went as far as to base their rejection of a new temple construction on the claim that no demolition had ever taken place because no temple had existed there. This was reckless, for if the political choice for the preservation of the mosque were based on the historical non-existence of the medieval temple at the site, then the eventual discovery of such a temple would justify a contrario the replacement of the mosque with a restored temple. At least in theory, but the Marxists were confident that their opponents would never get the chance to press this point. Under the prevailing power
equation, they expected to get away with a plain denial of history rather than a mere insistence on divorcing history from politics.

Secular debate-dodgers

In December 1990, the short-lived Socialist-dominated government of Chandra Shekhar invited the two lobby groups involved, the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Babri Masjid Action Committee, to mandate a team of scholars for discussing the historical truth of the matter. Misled by the media into believing that the Hindu claims were pure fantasy, the BMAC office-bearers arrived ill-prepared, expecting a cakewalk over the discredited case of the VHP fanatics. They were speechless when the VHP team presented dozens of documents supporting their case. The BMAC then invited a team of proper historians chaired by Marxist professor R.S. Sharma, who arrived at the next meeting with the demand that they be recognized as “independent scholars” entitled to sit in judgment on the controversy, i.e. to pass a verdict between their BMAC employers and their VHP opponents. The government representative did not grant this hilarious demand. At the next meeting, they declared that they hadn’t studied the evidence yet and needed six more weeks, a strange statement from people who had just led 42 academics in signing a petition confirming once and for all that there was absolutely no evidence at all for a temple. At the meeting scheduled for 24 January 1991, they simply didn’t show up anymore.

In July 1992, the state government of Uttar Pradesh, dominated by the Hindu nationalist BJP (Indian People’s Party), ordered the levelling and cleaning of the terrain around the mosque. Before and during the work, archaeologists were permitted to search the site. They discovered dozens of pieces of temple architecture and Hindu religious sculptures. A cry went up among the Marxist academics that the sculptures had been stolen from museums and planted at the site. The central government (Congress) locked the pieces away. The minister in charge, Arjun Singh, was a militant secularist and eager to embarrass the BJP, yet the academics never asked him to have the sculptures investigated by an international team of experts who could have certified their allegation. Indeed, their behaviour was one of strictly ignoring this new body of evidence, as if they didn’t believe their own claim of a forgery.

In October 1992, the central government of Narasimha Rao (Congress) tried to revive the scholars’ discussion. This time, the BMAC team quite reasonably protested that there was no point in talking unless the VHP called off its announced demonstration in Ayodhya scheduled for December 6. The VHP was adamant that Hindu society’s right to the site could not be made dependent on mundane factors such as judicial verdicts and academic disputes. This was an instance of the Hindu nationalist movement’s long tradition of smashing its own windows and of spurning the intellectual struggle which in this case had been going in its favour. On the plea that “you don’t need arguments to love your mother”, meaning Mother India, the Hindu nationalists had always neglected intellectual and media work and favoured a mindless activism. Except for one (S.P. Gupta), all the scholars who had argued their case at the government-sponsored discussion had been outsiders to the movement; the VHP leadership itself, like its BMAC counterpart, never took the evidence debate very seriously.
The Demolition

So, activism replaced argument on December 6, 1992. The official leadership represented at the demonstration in Ayodhya by L.K. Advani (who today is Deputy Prime Minister) had wanted to keep the affair purely ceremonial, singing some hymns to Rama as a sufficient act of confirming the Hindu claim to the site. But an elusive leadership within the crowd had other plans. A small group had come well-prepared for a demolition job, and once they broke ranks from the official ceremony to methodically pull down the mosque, much of the crowd joined in. Hindu movement officials tried to stop them, even when the police withdrew from the scene, but to no avail. The BJP state government resigned at once, but the central government did not physically intervene until the next morning, when the activists had cleared the debris and consecrated a little tent with the three statues as the provisional new Rama temple. In a typical instance of the Congress culture, Narasimha Rao on the one hand declared that the mosque should be rebuilt and on the other hand created an accomplished fact on the ground which practically precluded the prospect of rebuilding the mosque.

It is an odd but highly significant fact that the Indian media subsequently refused to open a search for who exactly organised the demolition. None of them seemed to care for the scoop of the year: “This man (photograph) organized the demolition.” Clearly, they thought it politically most profitable to pin the blame on the so-called “hardliner” Advani, the one Hindu leader who was most definitely not behind it. He had burst into tears upon seeing the fabled discipline of his activists break down and had been narrowly dissuaded from resigning as party leader in his post-demolition confusion.

During the demolition, another load of temple sculptures came to light from among the debris, including an inscription detailing how it was part of a temple to “Vishnu, slayer of Bali and of the ten-headed one”, built in ca. 1140 under king Udai Chand. Rama is considered an incarnation of Vishnu, and the two enemies he defeated were king Bali and king Ravana, usually depicted as ten-headed in recognition of his brilliant mind. As the reader will expect by now, this evidence too was locked away and strictly ignored by the “secularists”. Until 2003, when People’s Democracy, the paper of the Marxwadi Communist Party, alleged foul play. It seemed that the Lucknow State Museum mentioned in its catalogue a 20-line inscription dedicated to Vishnu and satisfying in every detail the description of the piece discovered during the demolition,-- but which had gone missing since the late 1980s. So it was alleged that someone had stolen this inscription from the museum and planted it at the site shortly before the demolition. During the initial scholars’ debate in 1990-91, the VHP-mandated team had discovered that no less than 4 documents kept in Muslim libraries had demonstrably been tampered with in order to remove references to the “birthplace temple”. Here the secularists had their great occasion to get back at them and expose them in turn as cheaters who had planted a stolen inscription. However, museum director Jitendra Kumar declared that the piece had never left the museum, even though it had not been on display, and he showed it at a press conference for all to see (Hindustan Times, 8 May 2003). In
spite of many similarities, it differed from the Ayodhya find in shape, colour and text contents.

Meanwhile, in 1993 the central government had approached the Supreme Court with a request to evaluate the historical evidence. It is clear that Narasimha Rao, the most pro-Hindu Prime Minister of independent India so far (more so than the wobbly BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee), hoped to use a positive verdict as the basis for a settlement favouring the Hindu claim. But in October 1994, the Supreme Court turned down the request.

**Scanning for the underground remains**

The resumption of the evidence debate took place in late 2002, when the Allahabad High Court secretly ordered the scanning of the site’s underground. The Tojo India Vikas International Company carried out a Ground Penetration Radar survey and found indications of a structure in and around the mosque site. Canadian geophysicist Claude Robillard, invited by Tojo to give his expert reading, couldn’t say just what building had been there, but: “All I know is, there is some structure under the mosque.” (Rediff.com, 19 March 2003)

The existence or otherwise of the medieval temple never depended on the results of the radar scanning: it had already been proven by a wealth of documentary and archaeological evidence, which in any other circumstance would have been deemed conclusive. It was only because of the brutal denial of the evidence by a group of vocal academics and allied politicians that the Court considered it wiser to come up with a new and as yet unchallenged type of evidence.

To the Court, the radar findings were sufficient encouragement to order a further dig at the site in order to verify that there were foundations of a building predating the Babri Masjid. We should be clear in our minds about what kind of evidence could be expected, as this digging took place at the foundations level. This is not where sculptures or furniture normally reside (though a few objects were found nonetheless) but where the unadorned foundations of walls and pillars have quietly survived the onslaught that destroyed the overground constructions they supported. Also, foundations do not by themselves inform us of the type of building they supported, whether secular or religious.

In the months when the digging took place, the newspapers mentioned some new findings once in a while. Thus, “an ancient stone inscription in the Dev Nagari script and a foundation were discovered in the ongoing excavation in the acquired land in Ayodhya today”, while “stone pieces and a wall were found in other trenches” and “a human figure in terracotta, sand stone netting, decorated sand stone in three pieces were found in one trench” (The Hindu, 5 May 2003). In this light it is understandable that a Babri Masjid supporter, Naved Yar Khan, approached the Supreme Court with a petition to prohibit all archaeological digging at the contentious site; which was rejected (The Hindu, 10 June 2003). The secularists had always opposed archaeological fact-finding at the site; they don’t like science.

*The great Indian vanishing trick*
After the ASI had been registering new findings for months, a handful on Monday, one on Tuesday, several on Wednesday, the world learned to its surprise that the final tally somehow amounted to zero. “No proof of structure in Ayodhya: ASI report”, according to Rediff.com (11 June 2003) The article confidently asserts that “the report also contradicts the Ground Penetration Radar survey”, but it doesn’t quote the ASI report. It only quotes Zafaryab Jilani, counsel for the Muslim claimant to the site, the Sunni Central Waqf Board, who alleges that “the ASI report does not speak about any such evidence”.

According to The Asian Age (11 June 2003), “The ASI team that conducted excavations at the disputed site where the demolished Babari masjid once stood in Ayodhya has not found any proof of a structure”. However, when you take the trouble of reading the subsequent fine print, you discover that this paper admits that while the radar findings of structural remains of a pre-Masjid structure were not confirmed at some indicated spots, they were confirmed at others. Yet the title falsely sums this up as: “Nothing found below Babri site: ASI”.

The Marxist-controlled Chennai daily The Hindu of 11 June likewise lets out the truth indirectly: the ASI “is reported to have said in its progress report that no structural anomalies suggesting the evidence [sic; existence?] of any structure under the demolished Babri Masjid had been found in 15 of the new trenches dug up at the site”,-- but those 15 were not the only ones investigated. So, at the very end of the article, there is an almost laconical addition: “Structural anomalies were, however, detected in 15 other trenches, the report said.” But the impression the paper seeks to convey, is summed up in the title: “No evidence of structures in some trenches”. It is as if someone is hit by two bullets, one scratching his arm but the other lethally penetrating his heart, and a newspaper reports: “Man shot at, unharmed by one of the bullets”.

Likewise, the Times of India of 11 June announced that there was absolutely definitely no sign whatsoever at all of a pre-Babri structure: “ASI finds no proof of structure below Babri Masjid: report”. Six days later, it still tried to keep up this version, now citing an unnamed “senior ASI official” who admitted finding new archaeological evidence such as sculptures and inscriptions but not the type of structural evidence suggested by the radar scan: “But the structural bases so far do not lend credence to the mandir theory.” Questioned further, he turns out not to base this belief on the new digging results but on older ones: “According to him, the theory of ‘a pre-existing temple because of structural bases’ has been demolished ‘convincingly’ over the years. He points to the discovery of pillar bases by B.B. Lal in the mid-1970s during his excavation of Ramayana sites in Ayodhya and says: ‘It has not been found to be fit evidence for a temple’.” (Times of India, 17 June 2003) This when B.B. Lal himself had confirmed that his findings do support the temple theory.

The Times of India article is titled: “Babri pillar bases do not support temple theory”. So at least it acknowledges the existence of some pre-Babri artefacts, viz. the pillar-bases. Now, how can there be foundation structures such as pillar bases in the ground unless they had been put there to support a building? The question is logical, but a bit too logical for the fanciful world of Indian secularism. The unnamed ASI official explains: “The excavated structural bases are neither aligned nor belong
to a single period.” Now this is sensational. What it means is that we have discovered a culture where people (Hindus, as it happens) once in a while put a pillar base into the ground, and then another one, and another one, without alignment, without any plan to make them support a straight wall or a preconceived building. And then they would leave it at that, and a century later some other fellow would add a few more pillar bases, again without plan, just for the fun of it. And all this foundational work would never be crowned with an overground building, it would just remain sitting in the ground waiting for the Muslim invaders to build a mosque over it. That's secularist archaeology for you.

In disinformation campaigns, the first stage of planting false news must be followed up with a second stage of making the false news into a familiar presence. Once it is repeated in women’s magazines, in TV chat shows, even in jokes, it is becoming part of the collective consciousness. That is the ambition of every disinformation operative worth his salt. In this case, at least, we have seen secularists grab the ball and run with it from day one. In interviews of Hindu or Muslim leaders, questions were opened with a reference to the “fact” that nothing was found underneath the Babri Masjid. Some Hindu leaders, such as the Kanchi Shankaracharya (who had just led a failed initiative to negotiate an amicable solution), were so little informed that they didn’t even contradict the claim. Columnist Saeed Naqvi, known as a moderate within the spectrum of Muslim opinion, spices an otherwise reasonable opinion piece (“Muslims must be generous”, Indian Express, 13 June) with the off-hand statement: “The ASI has found nothing under the mosque.” Clearly, some people are leaving no stone unturned to make this claim part of the received wisdom.

What was found

For those who hadn’t noticed anything wrong in the reports of 11 June claiming that nothing had been found, another news item on the same day should have alerted them. The party most likely to be elated over the non-finding of traces of a temple should be the Muslim pro-Masjid lobby groups, such as the Sunni Central Waqf Board. And yet: “ASI fabricating evidence in Ayodhya, says Waqf Board” (The Hindu, 11 June 2003). Or in a full sentence: “The Sunni Central Waqf Board, a plaintiff in the Ramjanmabhoomi Babri Masjid title suit, and some Muslim parties have accused the ASI team carrying out excavation work at the acquired land in Ayodhya of ‘fabricating’ archaeological evidence there.” So, according to this witness above suspicion, the ASI team clearly did find evidence, only it wasn’t supportive of pro-mosque and anti-temple claims and therefore had to be dismissed as “fabricated”.

All the papers carried this news, citing the Board’s counsel, Mr. Zafaryab Jilani: “ASI fabricating evidence in Ayodhya: Waqf board” (Press Trust of India, 10 June); “ASI fabricating evidence: Waqf Board” (Times of India, 11 June); “Foul play alleged at Ayodhya dig” (The Pioneer, 11 June). In the free-for-all of Indian secularism, we needn’t fuss over the fact that this grim allegation against the integrity of highly qualified scientists was levelled without any evidence. The decisive point is that, against the secularist claims and against their own interest, the Muslim plaintiffs admitted that the ASI excavators have not come up from their trenches empty-handed.
Whereas some Indian papers threw themselves headlong into the mendacious operation of denying the ASI findings, others did set the record straight, or at least gave space to guest authors to do so. As no one in his journalistic hurry seems to have tried to summarize the whole of the report, and everyone was satisfied with bits and pieces if at all they had seen the report, the numbers of finds differ according to the source. According to the Press Trust of India (11 June), “eight articles were found in excavation work in nine trenches on the acquired land around [the] makeshift temple”. Most helpfully, this source adds the communal detail: “There were 131 labourers including 29 Muslims engaged in the digging work today”. The internet version of The Hindu, www.hinduonnet.com (22 June), mentions “structural anomalies in 46 trenches” of the 84 trenches investigated, as well as “pillar bases and drains in some of the trenches”.

In Outlook India (23 June), Sandipan Deb gave a more detailed overview of the report: “While most papers covering the new ASI report last week said that it claims there was no structure under the Babri Masjid, what the report actually says is that of the 30 recent trenches, the team has found man-made structures in eight, and none in 16. In five, they couldn’t decide due to ‘structural activities in the upper levels’ (mainly the plinth of the Babri Masjid). One trench they did not survey. Among the structures listed in the report are several brick walls ‘in east-west orientation’, several ‘in north-south orientation’, ‘decorated coloured floor’, several ‘pillar bases’, and a ‘1.64-metre high decorated black stone pillar (broken) with yaksha figurines on four corners’. Now that I am sounding like a ‘running-dog of the VHP’ to the ‘lunatic lefties’, let me quickly add that they also found ‘Arabic inscription of holy verses on stone’. But what many people have missed out on – due to bias or sloth – is that these are findings only from the period of May 22 to June 6. This is not the full list. If they read the earlier reports, they would also find listed several walls, a staircase, and two black basalt columns ‘bearing fine decorative carvings with two cross-legged figures in bas-relief on a bloomed lotus with a peacock whose feathers are raised upwards’.”

For good measure, we should also quote a Hindu nationalist’s observations. On the website of the National Volunteer Corps or RSS (www.rss.org, 24 June 2003), Chetan Merani writes: “The excavations so far give ample traces that there was a mammoth pre-existing structure beneath the three-domed Babri structure. Ancient perimeters from East to West and North to South have been found beneath the Babri fabrication. The bricks used in these perimeters predate the time of Babar. Beautiful stone pieces bearing carved Hindu ornamentations like lotus, kaustubh jewel, alligator facade, etc., have been used in these walls. These decorated architectural pieces have been anchored with precision at varied places in the walls. A tiny portion of a stone slab is sticking out at a place below 20 feet in one of the pits. The rest of the slab lies covered in the wall. The projecting portion bears a five-letter Dev Nagari inscription that turns out to be a Hindu name. The items found below 20 feet should be at least 1,500 years old. According to archaeologists about a foot of loam layer gathers on topsoil every hundred years. Primary clay was not found even up to a depth of 30 feet. It provides the clue to the existence of some structure or the other at that place during the last 2,500 years. More than 30 pillar bases have been found at equal spans. The pillar-bases are in two rows and the rows are parallel. The pillar-base rows are in North-South direction. A wall is superimposed upon another wall. At least three layers of
the floor are visible. An octagonal holy fireplace (yajna kund) has been found. These facts prove the enormity of the pre-existing structure. (...) Moulded bricks of round and other shapes and sizes were neither in vogue during the middle ages nor are in use today. It was in vogue only 2,000 years ago. Many ornate pieces of touchstone (kasauti stone) pillars have been found in the excavation. Terracotta idols of divine figurines, serpent, elephant, horse-rider, saints, etc., have been found. Even to this day terracotta idols are used in worship during Diwali celebrations and then put by temple sanctums for invoking divine blessings. The Gupta and the Kushan period bricks have been found. Brick walls of the Gahadwal period (12th Century CE) have been found in excavations. Nothing has been found to prove the existence of residential habitation there. The excavation gives out the picture of a vast compound housing a sole distinguished and greatly celebrated structure used for divine purposes (...)."

*The world media as amplifier of the secularist version*

In spite of a very aggressive campaign of lies by a few spearheads of “secularism”, the true story was in the public domain for anyone with the curiosity to find out. Yet, the international media’s reporting on the matter consisted exclusively in copying the most mendacious version. The Reuters despatch for 11 June 2003 is titled: “Dig finds no sign of temple at Indian holy site”. More than 90% of the text rehashes the story of riots and other incidents that have punctuated the dispute. What little it says about the new findings, is this: “A three-month excavation has found no evidence yet to back nationalist claims of a Hindu temple under the ruins of a mosque in northern India (...) The state-run Archaeological Survey of India has submitted an interim report saying digging so far at the site in Ayodhya town had ‘not found remains of any structure that remotely resembles a temple’, a source at the Survey said on Wednesday.”

Note that the actual report is not quoted, merely what “a source” at the ASI has claimed about it. Note also the slanted phrase about “nationalist claims of a Hindu temple”, as if there were anything typically nationalist about acknowledging historical facts. The existence of that temple had been a matter of consensus among Muslims, Europeans and Hindus, both nationalist and anti-nationalist, until the JNU professors issued their fatwa to disregard the evidence and deny history. Note also that no mention is made of the wealth of evidence extant before the radar scanning and the recent diggings: a fine example of how the public is led by the nose into seeing only a very small selected part of the matter rather than the full perspective which one is entitled to expect from quality media.

And this is BBC News on 11 June 2003: “No sign’ of Ayodhya temple”. Here again, no information from the horse’s mouth, only from secondary sources: “There have been widespread reports across the Indian media that the excavation of a disputed holy site in India has produced no evidence of a Hindu temple, according to archaeologists’ reports.” Again, most of the article is but a rehashing of stale riot news, and then one sentence: “In an interim report, the ASI says it has not found any evidence of ruins of a Hindu temple.” Which is a lie, as well as a misrepresentation of the stakes of the present round of digging: ruins normally stand on and above the ground level, what the archaeologists were digging for was the foundational structures.
As we move deeper into the periphery, from the *Times of India* via the BBC to the local papers in distant countries, we see the last references to the actual findings disappear. By now, the report has been transformed into a morality tale, with the light-bringing secularists exposing the dark lies of the monstrous Hindu nationalists. In the Flemish tabloid *De Morgen* (12 June 2003), Asia desk editor Catherine Vuylsteke calls the fact that a temple had been forcibly replaced by a mosque “an evil fairy-tale”. And this is her version of the news: “The temple, it turned out yesterday, is a phantom. For three months, experts have dug for traces of it, all in vain. By the end of the month their definitive report should follow, but for now Rama’s home remains unfindable. Bad luck for the ultranationalists, who had hoped to base their next election campaign on the fairy-tale. But they still might manage to, some fear. Yesterday already, the first politicians expressed doubts about the archaeologists’ findings. Other Hindu leaders said, and this is even more dangerous, that the facts don’t matter. What counts is what you believe. We now know that Rama didn’t live in Ayodhya, while Allah did until 1992.”

This passage is symptomatic for most of what is wrong with India reporting. It is totally based on a source which makes no secret of its partisan involvement, indeed of its unreserved hatred for the Hindu nationalists. But the most striking aspect of this particular instance of distorted reporting is that much of it is purely deductive: from a small core of facts, all manner of seemingly logical assumptions are added to put flesh on the bones of the poorly understood Indian situation, and these speculations are presented as fact. Thus, it seems plausible to assume that the BJP wants to use Ayodhya in its elections campaigns, which it did in 1989 and 1991. However, to the frustration of its more activist sympathizers, the BJP has effectively disowned the Ayodhya issue immediately after reaping the benefits in the 1991 elections (when it became the leading opposition party), and has stayed away from it in the campaigns of 1996, 1998 and 1999. Indeed, the demolition was partly an outcry of the activists against the BJP leadership, whose participation in the ceremony they correctly saw as perfunctory and insincere. Once the BJP came to power and proved time and again how it was in no mind to build the temple, criticism from the hardliners has only increased. Given the infighting between temple loyalists and pragmatists, the last thing the BJP now wants is an election campaign focused on the Ayodhya issue.

Second case in point, the first politicians to express doubts about the archaeologists’ findings have not been the Hindu nationalists but the Babri Masjid lobbyists. All through the past 14 years, the secularists have always opposed archaeological research at the site, saying that this would open a “Pandora’s box” of similar initiatives at the literally thousands of mosque sites where temples used to stand (and omitting to mention their fear that in Ayodhya itself, this digging was sure to prove them wrong, as it now has). Yet, because the recent archaeological findings are falsely presented as going against the Hindu nationalist position, distant India-watchers deductively assume that the opposition against the diggings must come from the Hindu nationalists.

*Conclusion*
Distorted or even totally false reporting on communally sensitive issues is a well-entrenched feature of Indian journalism. There is no self-corrective mechanism in place to remedy this endemic culture of disinformation. No reporter or columnist or editor ever gets fired or formally reprimanded or even just criticized by his peers for smearing Hindu nationalists. This way, a partisan economy with the truth has become a habit hard to relinquish.

Yet, in the instance under consideration, the brutal distortion of the facts pertaining to the recent archaeological findings may be a matter of more than just a bad habit. Some people learn from their failures, but these disinformation specialists may also have learned from their successes. Consider a few earlier instances.

After the BJP came to power in 1998, India should have witnessed a genocide of the minorities, gas chambers and what not. At least if you believed the predictions made by the secularists in the preceding years. Nothing of the kind happened, so in the next two years the secularists tried to make the most of what few incidents did take place. In particular, all manner of small incidents within the Christian community were at once blamed on the evil hand of Hindu nationalism. Thus, in the Central-Indian town of Jhabua, a quarrel among mostly christianized tribals led to the rape of four nuns. With no Hindu nationalists in sight, the media decided nonetheless that this was an act of Hindu nationalist cruelty against the poor hapless Christian minority. Though the police investigation confirmed the total innocence of the Hindu nationalists in this affair, their guilt has been consecrated by endless repetition in the media. While the media in India couldn’t prevent the truth from quietly making itself known, the international media have never published a correction, and the story of “four nuns in Jhabua raped by Hindu nationalists” now keeps on reappearing as an evergreen of anti-Hindu hate propaganda.

Likewise, a series of bomb blasts against Christian churches in South India was automatically blamed on the Hindu nationalists. In that version, the story made headlines around the world: Hindu bomb terror against Christians. Hindu organizations alleged that it was a Pakistani operation, which only earned them ridicule and contempt. Yet, when two of the terrorists blew themselves up by mistake, their getaway car led the police to their network, and the whole gang was arrested. It turned out to be a Muslim group, Deendar Anjuman, with headquarters in Pakistan. But this was not reported on the front-pages in India nor made the topic of flaming editorials; and in the international media, it was not reported at all. In the worldwide perception of Hindu nationalism, the association with raping nuns and bombing churches has stuck.

So, moral of the story: feel free to write lies about the Hindu nationalists, for even if you are found out, most of the public will never hear of it, and you will not be made to bear any consequences. Striking first is what counts. Any second round in which the truth comes out, will hardly be noticed. Indeed, conditioned by the initial lie, many readers and viewers will deride the correction as an attempt at “denial” of the grim facts which “everybody knows well enough”. And the audience abroad will never even be informed that there has been a correction.

In the present case: what are the chances that BBC World will ever broadcast the real results of the ASI investigation in Ayodhya? If the issue ever comes up again, chances are that the editor will dismiss it as uninteresting: “Haven’t we already done
something on those Ayodhya excavations lately?” And even if it gets adequate coverage, it will never be able to undo the impression created by the initial story. So, apart from being the natural implementation of a bad habit, this particular lie about the excavations in the secularist Indian media may well be part of a deliberate ploy to condition public opinion against the true story if and when it ever comes out. For fourteen years, the secularists have worked so hard to keep the lid on the Ayodhya evidence that they don’t want some puny radar scanners or some muddy-handed archaeologists to expose the facts now.

THE END